Executive Summary

By the year 2030, the sixteen county North Texas region may be home to almost 9.5 million people. Where these individual residents choose to live and work will have a major effect on the quality of life for all North Texans in the coming decades — from environmental impacts such as air and water quality to economic vitality, availability of parks, traffic congestion and desirable community character. Decisions made today about regional development patterns, and the public and private investments that result from these choices, will determine the region’s ability to be successful and sustainable in the long term.

What is Vision North Texas?

Vision North Texas is a partnership of private, public, and academic organizations working to increase awareness about the growth expected in North Texas and to involve people and organizations in initiatives that accommodate that growth successfully and sustainably. The partnerships’ three Charter Sponsors are the Urban Land Institute’s North Texas District Council (ULI), the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) and the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA); many other organizations participate as partners and sponsors. Vision North Texas brings together people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to discuss common interests, understand differences, and find solutions. It educates people about the change and growth our region is facing, and about the options we have to successfully accommodate this growth. It is the region’s forum to debate and agree on a shared vision for our region and a practical action program to create that future. It provides North Texas decision-makers with the tools they need to make better choices that will make this vision a reality.

In September 2007, the Vision North Texas leadership began an ambitious effort to create North Texas 2050, a document that will be a ‘gamebook’ designed to help the region grow more successfully and sustainably. North Texas 2050 will include a Regional Vision Statement describing the region of the future that current residents would like to achieve. It will also contain an Action Package of tools and techniques that can be used by many different private and public decision-makers to help achieve that regional vision.
This report, *Regional Choices for North Texas*, is the first product of this ambitious effort. It compiles research and information about critical issues that will shape the future of North Texas. It provides a complete picture of our region as it exists today. It describes the future that is expected if North Texas continues “business as usual” and follows current trends and plans. Then, it proposes a set of alternatives to this future that are based on the results of the subregional workshops and the ideas of the region’s stakeholders.

**What defines North Texas today?**

North Texas is one of the major metropolitan areas of the 21st century United States. It is a unique result of its natural surroundings, the post World War II-era when it experienced most of its growth, and the choices its individual residents and businesses have made as they have invested in North Texas communities.

North Texas is big. The geographic area of North Texas is larger than the state of Massachusetts. This is the fourth-largest metropolitan area in the nation in numbers of people and jobs (behind only New York, Los Angeles and Chicago) and the fifth-largest in terms of gross domestic product.

North Texans are diverse. About 57% of the region’s residents are white. Exhibit 1.2 shows there are significant numbers of black, Hispanic and Asian residents as well. More than half (55%) of the region’s residents are native Texans. Of the 19% who were born abroad, most came from Latin America or Asia.

The region’s households are also varied. Only 37% of the households in North Texas are families with children. Fully a quarter of North Texas households are single person households. Seniors living alone are 6% of the region’s households and non-family households are just over 5% of the households in the region. Housing is generally affordable here compared to other metropolitan areas, but people in important segments of the workforce (such as police officers) do not earn enough to afford median priced homes.

North Texas’ economic strength comes from many sectors including manufacturing, professional services, finance, retail and government. It has a higher concentration of high technology jobs than the national average. It is the home of 24 Fortune 500 companies.

With over 150 incorporated cities, North Texas offers a wide range of choice for residents and businesses. Unlike most metropolitan areas, there are many large cities here – Dallas, Fort Worth and nine other cities have more than 100,000 residents.

Though the region is less densely populated than older metropolitan areas like Chicago and Boston, it is more densely populated than the Houston and Atlanta regions and significantly more densely populated than the Seattle, Portland, Denver and Phoenix metropolitan areas.

On the other hand, there are many parts of North Texas that have relatively low intensities of development. Nearly 70% of the region’s housing stock is single family detached homes. This report’s analysis of development patterns uses a national sprawl index where the national average of all counties in all metropolitan areas is given a score of 100 and more compact counties score higher (for instance,
San Francisco County CA scored 209.27). Dallas, Tarrant and Collin counties are less sprawling than the national average. The region’s outlying counties – Ellis, Johnson, Kaufman and Parker – score below 90 on this index.

There is still a very large amount of North Texas yet to be shaped by decisions about development patterns and investments in the region’s natural areas and built infrastructure. Within the region’s 12 central counties, there were over 6,600 square miles of vacant and agricultural land in 2005. Combined with the four outlying counties, there are almost 10,000 square miles of land that are not yet part of the North Texas urban fabric. This is more land than the entire New York metropolitan area and almost three times the size of Yellowstone National Park.

The natural assets of North Texas do not include dramatic peaks or sweeping ocean shorelines. But they do include the nation’s largest urban hardwood forest (the Great Trinity Forest in Dallas), watersheds of four major Texas rivers (the Brazos, Sabine and Sulphur as well as the Trinity), native prairies and habitat for endangered or threatened species of plants and animals.

The pattern of regional development that accommodates today’s people and businesses is supported by an extensive infrastructure network. It requires substantial resources to function. The region used approximately 1.4 million acre feet of water in the year 2000 and an estimated 73.6 billion kilowatt hours of electricity in 2008. In 2007, the region’s urbanized center had over 151 million vehicle miles of travel on its 4,500 lane miles of major roadways. Public transportation and high occupancy vehicle systems carried approximately 100 million passenger trips that year, and there were 34 miles of completed off system Veloweb (bicycle) trails available in the region.

This regional pattern offers choice, but it also creates challenges. The air quality in most counties does not meet national standards, creating health concerns for residents with respiratory problems. The region’s rivers and streams have segments where water quality is impaired. The carbon footprint of North Texas (the amount of carbon dioxide or equivalent released into the atmosphere) is as large as the footprint for the entire state of New Mexico. People lost over one million hours a day in 2007 stuck in traffic congestion. And recent research indicates that people living in lower density communities (such as
the region’s outlying counties) are more likely to be obese or have hypertension. Throughout the region, aging infrastructure (such as bridges and dams) represents both a safety concern and a future cost – 14.6% of the region’s bridges are ‘structurally deficient’ or ‘functionally obsolete’ and 15.4% of its dams are considered ‘high hazard’.

**Where is North Texas headed?**

All projections indicate that North Texas will continue to grow significantly. By 2030, the 16 counties in North Texas could have almost 9.5 million people and by 2050 the region could have 12 million residents. The decisions and investments made now by North Texas residents, companies, local governments and other organizations will determine the future of North Texas. They will shape the quality of life experienced by future residents, the economic success of businesses and the overall sustainability of the region.

Current projections and approved plans paint a picture of what North Texas’ future could be like. They describe the ‘business as usual’ future for the region, which includes:

- **In 2030, the median age of North Texas residents will be similar to the median age today.** But the composition of the population will be different, with a smaller share of the population likely to be in the labor force. Children (19 and under) will also be a smaller share of the region’s population. Seniors (65 and older) will be a larger share of the population. A larger percentage of North Texas residents will be Hispanic.

- **People are expected to want different types of housing.** For example, the number of households in the market for transit-oriented housing (within one-half mile of transit stations) is expected to grow from about 46,000 in 2007 to over 270,000 in 2030.

- **The development pattern for the region is expected to continue growing outward at relatively low intensities.** This pattern will likely mean a reduction in the amount of land in natural areas and in agricultural use. It will increase the region’s impervious surface coverage.

- **The region’s “Mobility 2030” plan includes $70.9 billion in improvements to bike, pedestrian, rail, highway and other transportation systems by 2030.** Yet the hours lost to traffic congestion increase by almost 37%.

- **Energy demand by 2050 will be 21% higher than the currently available capacity.**

- **By 2050, water demand will more than double from year 2000 levels, exceeding the supplies currently expected to be available.**

- **All of the investments in buildings and ‘grey’ infrastructure that exist today will be much older.** Some will have exceeded their useful life and will need replacement. Others will need maintenance or rehabilitation.
Other aspects of the region – such as its natural or ‘green’ infrastructure – are not addressed in currently developed regional plans. So decisions about these assets often focus on individual sites, with little guidance about a site’s role in larger regional systems.

Many individual facilities that provide health care, education and cultural assets to communities in North Texas have studied their own anticipated demands. But these plans for facility expansions, replacements or other investments are not typically coordinated with the plans for the region’s overall development or for other facilities and infrastructure systems. So there may be other areas where ‘business as usual’ creates additional challenges for the region.

How could the future be different?

An extension of past trends is not the only possible future for North Texas. Vision North Texas has examined and highlighted some global and national issues that are likely to affect the region, as well as changes that are underway or under discussion in the region. Some of the possibilities reflected by these new directions are:

- Global efforts to reduce climate change are focusing on the role urban areas play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Alternative development patterns for North Texas have already been shown to reduce vehicle miles traveled, a key factor in reducing the area’s carbon footprint. Over 60% of North Texans live in cities whose Mayors have signed the U.S. Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement.

- The future may be shaped by even larger urban regions. Several national initiatives consider the ‘Texas Triangle’ to be one of ten megaregions nationwide. The Texas Triangle connects the North Texas, Houston and San Antonio regions.

- Natural systems (the ‘green infrastructure’) can retain the open spaces and natural features of the region while addressing issues such as stormwater management. They reduce the needs for the traditional ‘grey infrastructure’ of pipes and pavement. By reducing the region’s impervious surfaces, they can help address the urban heat island effect and other concerns.

- The urban forest is becoming a recognized asset that can contribute to reduced energy use, a smaller carbon footprint, and a more livable region. It may become an economic asset if carbon trading systems are part of a national climate change strategy.

- A study by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy has calculated that the DFW region could meet all its increased needs for electricity for the next 15 years through a suite of nine conservation policies.
‘Architecture 2030’ advocates reducing greenhouse gas emissions (and lowering energy consumption) by applying higher energy standards to new and renovated buildings. For North Texas, 45-50% of the housing units that will exist in 2030 have not been built yet. So these higher standards could make a difference to this region and its future.

New design that reflects ‘development excellence’ has been recognized in North Texas since 2003. Thirty five projects have received CLIDE awards in categories including new development, redevelopment, public planning and policy, raising public awareness and special development.

What do North Texans think?

North Texas stakeholders have participated in Vision North Texas workshops throughout the region, beginning with a regionwide event in 2005 and continuing with subregional workshops in 2007 and 2008. Workshop participants met in small, diverse groups. Each group agreed on a shared vision of the future they hope to see for North Texas and a development pattern that accommodates expected growth and achieves this vision. Stakeholders at all workshops consistently describe preferred visions for the future that are not ‘business as usual’.

Vision North Texas participants – from diverse backgrounds and different communities – expressed frequent support for protection of natural resources and preservation of community character.
They were interested in patterns of growth that create mixed-use centers at various scales and locations. They created development patterns or scenarios that gave people more choice in how they travel, with rail, bicycle routes and pedestrian connections between homes, jobs and other destinations. Throughout their discussions, there was support for regional collaboration and coordination. Exhibit 1.3, “Live Life Linked”, reflects the vision and distribution of growth created by one stakeholder group at the Northwestern Subregional Workshop. On this map, orange Legos represent new housing expected from 2000 to 2030 and blue Legos represent jobs added during that time.

Stakeholders at Vision North Texas workshops have consistently supported regional efforts that change ‘business as usual’. Participant support for regional investment based on a preferred regional scenario ranges from 83% to 96% at Vision North Texas events held in the past three years.

**What alternatives might we consider?**

Vision North Texas has identified five scenarios that provide a range of possibilities for the region’s future. All scenarios assume that the 16 county region will have 9.49 million people and 5.58 million jobs in 2030. These scenarios are summarized in Exhibit 1.4. Chapter 5 of this report includes a description of the development and investment choices they reflect. Exhibit 1.5 uses a digital version of one workshop group concept to illustrate the southeastern part of the Connected Centers Scenario.

### Exhibit 1.4: North Texas 2050 Scenario Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Key Concept</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business As Usual</td>
<td>Continuation of current trends and adopted plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connected Centers</td>
<td>Give people more choice about how they connect to the places where they live, work and play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return on Investment</td>
<td>Maximize the benefit received from the extensive investment taxpayers and property owners have made in the region’s existing infrastructure &amp; development pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse, Distinct Communities</td>
<td>Create a region with different sorts of communities and centers, built on the traditional character of regional communities but designed to meet the needs of the region’s future markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Region</td>
<td>Emphasize green development or natural assets as the foundation for future regional growth</td>
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</tbody>
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### Exhibit 1.5: Connected Centers Scenario
The entire set of scenarios will be analyzed in terms of its development pattern, benefits and impacts on the region by 2030. A more general assessment will extend the effects of these scenarios to the year 2050.

Stakeholders should not select one scenario to support at this time. Instead, they should consider whether the set of scenarios proposed here are the ones that should be studied.

**What can you do?**

Participants at subregional update sessions will share their opinions at these sessions. Regional Summit 2008 will bring together additional leaders to focus on the set of possible alternative scenarios and the action tools that are most important to achieve the region’s desired vision. Ideas, comments and other input will also be received online at www.visionnorthtexas.org. By signing up for the email list on this site, interested individuals and organizations can be sure they receive information as Vision North Texas continues.

The next set of public sessions for Vision North Texas will occur in June 2009 when the results of the alternative scenario study are released. During the summer and early fall, the region’s stakeholders will participate in a dialogue about the implications of these scenarios. This debate should set the direction for North Texas 2050, the vision for the region’s future and the action package of tools and techniques all decision-makers can use. North Texas 2050 should be completed in late 2009.