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Point Person: Our Q&A with Michael Morris on shaking up the transportation debate



North Central Texas Council of Governments
Photo taken in spring 2010 of Michael Morris, P.E., Director, NCTCOG
Transportation Department. Photo provided Aug. 19, 2010 by the North Central
Texas Council of Governments.

Published: 13 January 2012 09:22 PM

As transportation director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments,
[Michael Morris](#) heads the staff of the Regional Transportation Council. The RTC

guides where and how public money is spent on transportation — and has been increasing its emphasis on guiding development. Morris offers perspective on the novel strategy.

You say you'll be talking more about schools, tax breaks to business and other things I don't associate with transportation. Can you explain?

For the last 20 or 30 years, transportation woke up every day and was dealt a land-use system that produced a lot of inefficiencies — long trips, single-occupancy users, very spread out, auto-dependent. You had a lot of clusters of homes being built, and you could go two or three or four miles, and there's no drugstore or [7-Eleven](#) or anything else that would create an ability to do some of your transportation needs by walking or some other way.

So this last year, we talked to the RTC and said: We in transportation, in order to help reduce the magnitude of the cost in the future, we need to get involved in the land-use side. Why don't we work on creating partnerships with local government, with school districts, with developers, with people who create entertainment districts, sports venues, and respond on the transportation side in ways that reduce the costs and taxes that citizens have to pay?

How does that involve schools?

If you look at this historically, you had huge suburban flight. The quality of our schools went down in our central cities and our older suburban school districts. The school districts will tell you, we need families. The key, No. 1 indicator for them to have a successful school is a parent who comes and participates in their child's education. To create an opportunity to reverse this trend is to find exemplary schools, create some pilot programs, give people a housing choice, have people with or without families to come back, find out what schools still have the opportunity to put more students in there so we don't trigger the construction of even more schools. We have a lot of excess roadway capacity in those parts of town. Improve the signal systems, intersections, sidewalks, create a more safe and walkable community, then it creates an opportunity for retail to go back in.

If we can get 50,000 residents to come live in downtown [Arlington](#), Dallas, [Fort Worth](#) and [Irving](#) — just those four cities — it may cost us very little in transportation dollars, vs. 50,000 who located in the northern part of Denton County or western part of Parker County, that triggers huge amounts of sewage treatment facilities, water facilities, transportation facilities and schools.

Some cities use sales taxes, their 4a and 4b taxes, for economic development to attract businesses, and you're talking about restricting that. How so?

I think there needs to be a review of what is in the best interest of government. If the purpose of 4a and 4b is to take an employer from a part of the Dallas-Fort Worth region, who is paying taxes to government, and move them 10 miles to another portion of the region and give them five years of free taxes, then the impact to government is reduced revenue for transportation. We in the transportation environment have to pick up the pieces. I think the legislators and elected officials ought to talk about it.

Why is Dallas-Fort Worth so auto-centric?

If you developed post-[World War II](#), you've been given a land-use situation that is very inefficient. You have a lot of people in four- and five-thousand-pound pieces of equipment driving alone. You have a region that has seven or eight parking places for each vehicle to make sure it can do whatever it needs to do. You have huge interchanges that cost \$250 million to build. With 3 million more people coming into the region in 30 years, we cannot do business the way we've been doing business.

These low-density, post-automotive environments are changing. As people get older, they don't necessarily want the grass-mowing, suburban community. And you have a lot of younger people who don't necessarily have the same dream that we or our parents had of owning that home. Maybe they'd rather live in more fun, walkable, lots-of-things-to-do communities. Are we seeing the pendulum swing to a balanced marketplace in the way people wish to live, shop and have fun?

If that's the case, why has DART's ridership plateaued despite greater access to rail? Aren't people as wedded to cars as ever?

As we review the census from 2000 to 2010, I think that pattern is generally still there — slow growth in central cities, particularly Dallas, huge amounts of growth in Collin County. You have communities there that are doubling in 10 years. But if you look at things at the more neighborhood level, you can see what's happening — in Uptown in Dallas, [American Airlines Center](#), downtown [Plano](#), Old Town [Lewisville](#), Seventh Street and the Cultural District in Fort Worth. You have things we didn't see 15 years ago. I think the pendulum is swinging. But the picture isn't clear.

If Dallas-Fort Worth continues to grow like it did in the '60s through the '80s, and we put another 500,000 people north of U.S. 380, within 25 minutes of Lake Texoma, I don't know where the revenue for the transportation system is going to support that, when a lot of those jobs are in the metroplex and those people still want to get on an airplane and go to a Dallas Cowboys game.

But the jury is still out.

This Q&A was conducted and condensed by editorial writer Rodger Jones. His email address is rmjones@dallasnews.com. Morris can be reached at mmorris@nctcog.org.