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## Housing Trends

# America's Most Expensive Commutes

Matt Woolsey, 08.08.07, 11:45 AM ET

It's often said that the trip to work [can kill you](#). But if you live in Houston, what really takes a beating is your wallet.

There, the average commuter spends 20.9% of his annual household costs on getting to work.

He's not alone. [Cleveland](#), [Detroit](#), [Tampa, Fla.](#), [Kansas City, Mo.](#), and [Cincinnati](#) also landed on our list of the country's biggest cities where transportation eats up a fifth or more of household costs, according to a study by the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership (STPP), a nonprofit research firm, which draws on 2003 Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the most recent available. The study looked at annual transit costs such as gas and tolls, and public transit fare, as well as money spent on car payments and maintenance.

## In Pictures: America's Most Expensive Commutes

## In Pictures: America's Unhealthy Commutes

Robert Puentes, a metropolitan policy fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., says, "In Houston, the cost of transportation is the No. 1 household expense, above shelter."

But that's in part because Houstonians spend a lower than average proportion of their take-home pay on housing.

And that's the trade-off.

The percent of household income Houstonians spend on transportation may be the highest in the country, but when combined with the amount residents spend on housing expenses, Houston's aggregate cost ranks them 14th, with the composite cost equaling 52% of household income.

Transit costs are high because Houston has few policies hindering sprawl, which in turn allows for cheaper housing. In San Francisco, which is much more dense and has more prohibitive zoning laws than Houston, residents rank 22nd in commute costs but fifth in the combination of housing and transportation.

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Worst hit by the composite ranking were the residents of [Tampa](#) and [Miami](#) where housing and transportation costs were the most out of sync with the average household's income levels. Tampa residents spent 57.7%, while Miami denizens spent 57.5% of their take home pay on the two.

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### Number Crunching

The study also found a very high correlation between cities that had extensive train systems and those in which households spent the least on transportation costs. Four of the five cheapest commutes were rated as having large or extensive rail systems, and of the five most expensive commutes, only Cleveland was rated above having a small or non-existent rail system, according to STPP.

Besides saving commuters money on parking, tolls and gas, rail systems are often seen as a way to manage sprawl as train stations create central and desirable points for living and working.

It's important to understand, though, that the least costly commutes tend to be accompanied by high housing costs. New York

and San Francisco were among the cheapest in the country, at two and seven respectively and have some of the highest housing expenses and **least affordable housing markets** in the nation.

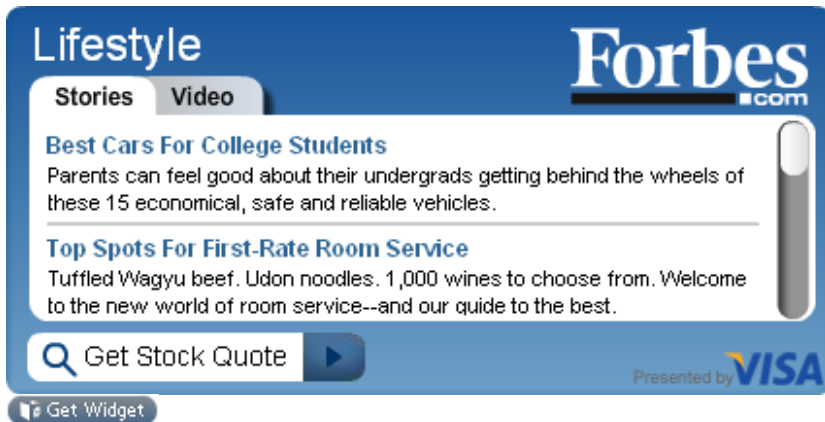
### Traffic In Texas

That's what's happening in Dallas. It and Houston have 15% of the country's **fastest-growing suburbs** between them. Dallas is investing \$4.86 billion in expanding its commuter rail system, Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART), which services area suburbs and neighboring Fort Worth. The job is expected to be completed in 2013 and local economists say the city should reap \$8.1 billion in increased economic activity over the life of the project. Houston, on the other hand, has mainly focused on road construction and expansion, which isn't expected to pay off as well.

"To say DART Rail's impact has been substantial for the Dallas region's economy would be an understatement," says Bernard Weinstein an economist at the University of North Texas Center for Economic Development. "It's a trend that's impossible to miss; the local business community certainly hasn't."

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