

Creating a vision for a better Houston

Partnership says it needs to look further ahead to deal with big issues

By L.M. Sixel

The Greater Houston Partnership plans to take a longer-term and more visionary approach to the issues facing Houston, leaders of the business group said Thursday.

Outgoing chairman Tony Chase told 1,000 members during the partnership's annual luncheon that as he and others reviewed last year's accomplishments — including its support for bond referendums for Houston's public schools and community college system and for international travel from Hobby Airport — they pondered whether the group was having an appropriate effect on the biggest civic issues.

"It took some soul-searching, but, ultimately, we concluded that we were not," Chase said.

"We started to see a new model that would help GHP to effectively look beyond any given calendar year as it attacks our region's most important economic development and policy issues," Chase said, before David McClanahan was installed as the 2013 chairman of the partnership.

McClanahan, CEO and president of CenterPoint Energy, then reminded members about the ideas of Houston's great civic visionaries that turned a shallow bayou into the Port of Houston, built the first domed sports stadium and established the Texas Medical Center.

"We know the future Houston we imagine will not just happen," he said. "We must identify those things that are most important to our community: education for our children and grandchildren, the basic infrastructure necessary for the economic success of our region, the health and well-being of fellow citizens."

The partnership last fall hired the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. to determine which direction it should go, partnership president and CEO Bob Harvey said.

From that, Harvey said, the partnership plans to take a long-term view, expand its membership base, increase its research efforts, engage in policy-making in a more robust way, improve communications with its members and the public and serve as a regional leader and consensus builder rather than just a "downtown or large company-centric organization."

Attendees applauded when Harvey announced the partnership planned to play a key role in immigration reform. "We can be a big player in the debate," he said.