

White places focus on livability

■ He says help from businesses will help city fight economic woes

By **TERRI LANGFORD**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

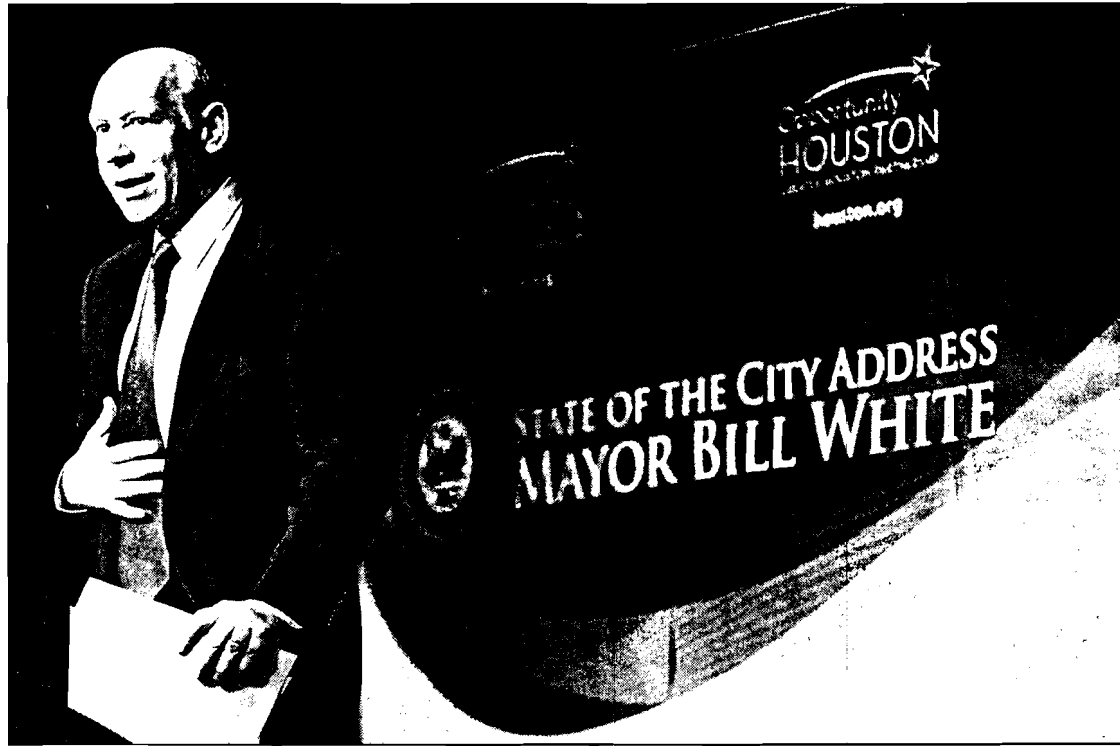
If Houstonians want the nation's fourth-largest city to continue to weather the current mortgage crisis and looming recession, its business community needs to invest in the city's appearance and support projects that improve neighborhoods, Mayor Bill White said Friday.

"Our greatest challenges arise from this very success," White told more than 2,000 members of the Greater Houston Partnership at the annual State of the City address at the Hilton Americas downtown.

White continued to hit on the importance of a balance between growth and livability in the nation's largest city without zoning.

Even with a slowdown in job growth this past year, the Houston region, which includes Harris and surrounding counties, managed to add 60,000 jobs in 2007, according to the Texas Workforce Commission.

Unemployment for the region is at 4 percent, beating the national unemployment rate of 5 percent. Although Houston experienced a decline in monthly home sales in December — 5,000 for the region, compared with 6,000 in December 2006, according to the



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SPEECH: Mayor Bill White touts his administration's accomplishments in Friday's State of the City address.

Houston Association of Realtors, it was far less than the slide across the nation.

White opened with a list of his administration's recent successes: foreclosure proceedings on thousands of abandoned properties, demolition of more than 2,000 dangerous buildings and the improvement of utility and road infrastructure in blighted neighborhoods. He also noted the violent crime rate has fallen 8 percent in Houston since he became mayor in 2004.

Finding a balance

White also addressed how Houston's success in these more sober economic times have given way to growing pains: More people and jobs means more traffic and increased demands for better city services.

"Where I need your ideas is balancing this extraordinary growth we've experienced with the need for maintaining good quality of life in our community," White said. "This is not

just an issue for one year; this is an issue that confronts all successful organizations and, in particular, successful cities."

Other proposals include:

- Earmarking \$500 million for drainage projects.

- Reducing landfill waste with wood-chipping facilities throughout the city.

- Raising the senior exemption on property taxes.

- Cutting the overall tax rate for the fourth consecutive year and trying to become the first Texas city to reach a multiyear pay agreement with city employees.

- Planting 100,000 new trees, at a cost of \$2 million a year for five years.

At times, White's speech seemed to zero in on homebuilders and developers, stressing the importance of maintaining a metropolitan area that keeps homeownership in reach for most of its residents, while offering new development without affecting older homes.

White alluded to the ongoing battle over the planned 23-story Ashby highrise near Rice University but did not mention it by name. The project is on hold as the city legal department works on an ordinance to regulate developments that would have an adverse effect on traffic.

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