



KARLA CISNEROS
Houston City Council Member, District H

July 27, 2017

Mr. Quincy Allen, P.E.
Houston District Engineer
TxDOT Houston District Office
P.O. Box 1386
Houston, Texas 77251-1386

Re: North Houston Highway Improvement Project

Dear Mr. Allen,

District H is in the unique position of containing I-45 from Downtown almost all the way to the beltway. As a result we have a significant interest in the outcome of this project. Many of the neighborhoods that are adjacent to I-45 have not benefited from its existence, languishing as underdeveloped and isolated corners of the city. The highway has served as a great divide rather than a true connecting force for many of these communities, and so the NNHIP stands as a once in a generation opportunity to address some of the problems caused by I-45.

Below are recommendations and observations amassed from various community groups and from this office on perceived issues with the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

GENERAL

- (I) Harris County Toll Road Authority is currently planning the Hardy Downtown Connector, a project which offers many opportunities for increased mobility options other than just increased lanes. The various detention areas integrated in the design of the project represent an opportunity to create a high comfort off-road hike & bike trail connecting the northern areas of the city to downtown. This proposed trail must cross under the combined I-10/I-45 section at Elysian Street, and so we ask that TxDOT work with HCTRA to leave space for a high comfort, off-road hike & bike trail under the combined highways. This opportunity was identified after the approval of the Houston Bike Plan and so is not represented there. We ask that TxDOT honor any changes or alterations to the Houston Bike Plan submitted by the City's Planning Department.
- (II) The many detention ponds included in this plan should be designed as park areas or maintained green space in collaboration with the City Parks and Recreation Department. Poorly maintained green space is a significant issue in Houston due to the rapid growth of plant material, and District H already has many areas along the freeways and bayous that remain overgrown for a large part of the year. Maintained green space also serves as an opportunity to further one of Houston's most ambitious goals to create linear, connected parks and trails.

- (III) The design of any bridge crossing over I-45 should be designed in similar fashion to existing bridges over I-69 in artistic quality. The adjacent neighborhoods and Houston Arts Alliance should be consulted and have input in the design of these structures to best reflect the character of the area.

- (IV) The draft seems to indicate that the existing bike trail connection between White Oak Bayou and Spring Street will be demolished when I-45 is brought to ground level. The connector is the only currently existing bike connection over the White Oak Bayou other than the crossing at the other end of the Spring Street trail. Without this connector, the Spring Street path would dead-end as there are no nearby bike paths, trail or otherwise. We ask that TxDOT consider leaving space for the connector to remain or make another connector to keep access.

- (V) The proposal to include a shared use lane along the frontage roads is highly inadvisable. Mixing 40+ MPH speeds with bike traffic is a recipe for disaster unless TxDOT makes more changes to the design of the frontage roads. While bike and pedestrian paths are certainly welcome and encouraged, shared use lanes in this environment are dangerous and not supported unless further design elements are implemented to slow speeds.

Near Northside

LACK OF ACCESS/ISOLATION OF NEIGHBORHOOD:

The removal of the North Main exit along I-45 South severely restricts access to the Near Northside when traveling South. With Cavalcade and Quitman remaining as the only other exits it will be difficult to enter and leave the neighborhood if you miss the Cavalcade exit. This is compounded by the lack of a bridge at North Street, making access across I-45 even more difficult. We ask that TxDOT consider reinstating the North Street Bridge so traffic across I-45 is not bottlenecked at N. Main and Quitman.

The most devastating effect of the NHHIP on the Near Northside, however, is the wall of pavement that will be created by the diversion of I-45 around the east side of downtown. This barrier will exist physically and psychologically, further isolating the neighborhood from the rest of the city. A large portion of the community already uses biking and walking as primary modes of transportation. We recommend bridging the environmental gap created by the I-10/I-45 wall with a hike and bike trail to connect the neighborhood with downtown, such as the San Jacinto Street trail proposed on the Houston Bike Plan.

Similarly, shifting I-10 and I-45 to the north will create a barrier between University of Houston – Downtown and its closest neighborhood. Every effort must be made to overcome this further distancing of one of the most accessible institutions of higher education in Houston from one of the city’s most underserved areas. TxDOT must ensure the campus remains accessible to the Near Northside population, potentially through the construction of a trail or path to increase access from north to south.

Independence Heights

FLOODING/DRAINAGE:

Independence Heights suffers from frequent floods due to the expansive floodway of the Little White Oak Bayou, an issue that is being addressed by both the Harris County Flood Control District and the City of Houston. We ask that TxDOT coordinate their flood mitigation efforts with those of the Harris County Flood Control District so that the effects of the increased impervious surface area from I-45's expansion may be properly addressed and not contribute to this already serious issue.

NEED FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING:

TxDOT is buying out about 40 homes in Independence Heights for I-45's Right of Way, a significant number because Harris County Flood Control is also buying out 163 homes in the Glenburnie neighborhood of Independence Heights. Many of the homes in this neighborhood are subject to deferred maintenance and so we ask that TxDOT take careful consideration in the case of displaced homeowners in this area. Per TxDOT standards the homes the displaced homeowners relocate to must be decent, safe, and sanitary, and we ask TxDOT to ensure these homeowners are relocated into quality houses.

BAYOU TRAIL DEVELOPMENT:

Harris County has identified a severely flood-prone area along Little White Oak Bayou in Glenburnie where they are buying out homeowners mentioned above. The COH Bike Masterplan also identifies a bike trail to be located along the bayou in this location. We ask that TxDOT consider investing in the development of a hike and bike trail system along Little White Oak Bayou which runs under or parallel to I-45 for a significant portion of the project. Otherwise, the project must take into account the City of Houston's Bike Plan and leave the route open and available for future bike path development. This trail could serve as a catalyst for revitalization and increased mobility for both Independence Heights and even areas further north.

Sincerely,



Karla Cisneros, Council Member
City of Houston, District H