

2023 Reconnecting Communities & Neighborhoods Program-Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant

Houston Public Works and the Houston Planning and Development Department have collaborated on two applications for the 2023 Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Program - Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant. Project overviews and scopes are provided below.

Complete, Connected, Resilient Communities: Gulfton & Kashmere Gardens Resilient Sidewalks Project

Overview

The Complete, Connected, Resilient Communities: Gulfton & Kashmere Gardens Resilient Sidewalks Project (the Project) will work to address historic underinvestment and barriers in two Houston neighborhoods by improving sidewalks, drainage, and tree cover, which will work together to create climate-resilient streets that support a multimodal mobility network. The Project will invest \$43 million in walkability and resiliency improvements as identified in the Project Scope and Figure 2 below. Sidewalks in the Gulfton and Kashmere Gardens communities are intermittent or nonexistent, which creates safety concerns and barriers for all people, including students, elderly, and those with disabilities. There are few trees to provide relief from heat, improve air quality, or restore mental health. Flooding is a consistent concern among people who have few resources. The conditions along the corridors presented for this grant application create extremely unpleasant and often dangerous conditions for people walking, cycling, rolling, and using transit.

The Project was prioritized by the City of Houston due to the extensive local and regional planning work recently completed, including Resilient Houston, the Complete Communities initiative, and the Houston Resilient Sidewalks Plan. Each of these plans independently show that Gulfton and Kashmere Gardens are opportunities for investment in resilient infrastructure, bridging the gap between equity and opportunity, and improving mobility with scalable solutions for pedestrian mobility, enhanced stormwater management, and urban design. Collectively they show that the needs are staggering. The Project will help two of Houston's most economically disadvantaged communities address mobility and accessibility needs, social equity concerns (as identified under the Justice-40 program), and climate vulnerability while acting as a model for future neighborhood investments. The Project directly aligns with the goals of the Neighborhood Access and Equity program through the USDOT and the award of this grant will allow for

the creation of resilient pedestrian networks that enhance mobility and connectivity while alleviating environmental and socio-economic barriers that burden the communities.

Project Scope

Upon award, funding will be allocated to meet the needs of these two communities by creating a safe, reliable, and equitable pedestrian network that will also address flooding and conflicts between drainage and accessibility as defined in Figure 1. Once constructed, this project can be scaled and replicated to provide these same opportunities for other areas in need within the City of Houston.

North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) Connections Project

Overview

The North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) is a Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT)-led \$7 billion realignment and widening of IH-45 and other highways (see Figure 1). This grant application is for \$50,803,566.40 from the Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) grant fund to support construction of 24 spans over these highways so that NHHIP connects the neighborhoods in and around Downtown Houston with bridge cap parks, garden bridges, and signature bridges. Collectively, these facilities are named throughout this application as the “**NHHIP Connections.**”

Of the 24 facilities included in this NHHIP Connections NAE application, 15 are located partially or wholly within a disadvantaged area, 18 are on Houston’s high-injury network (defined as the 6% of streets where 60% of traffic deaths and serious injuries occur), and all are located within urban heat islands, in part, due to the sheer mass of multilane highway concrete with little to no park space or tree cover. This grant provides the opportunity to address some of the historic negative impacts of highway development on these communities, providing safer, cooler, and greener connections. As TxDOT is working to deliver the highway project, the City of Houston (City) is focused on transforming the State’s infrastructure through a community-led solution to cap the highways and reclaim the communities’ access to high quality social and economic opportunities.

In 2017, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner initiated a new dialogue with TxDOT that provided an opportunity for the community to be heard about NHHIP. Mayor Turner established and engaged a Facilitation Group comprised of civic leaders and community members around the theme of reducing the environmental impact and disruption of neighborhoods by highway expansion while embracing growth. When TxDOT’s NHHIP Record of Decision did not fully address community concerns, several community organizations submitted a complaint to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

Agreement, ensuring that TxDOT would collaborate with the City and other stakeholders to design the project in a way that mitigated potential harm to impacted communities, with specific focus on:

1. Reducing the NHHIP footprint
2. Minimizing displacements
3. Mitigating for flooding
4. Mitigating for air quality impacts
5. Adding structural caps over portions of the highway system
6. Expanding opportunities for parks/open space/trails/pedestrian and bicycle facilities
7. Ensuring safe access to the city during construction
8. Ensuring meaningful access for people with Limited English Proficiency

This NAE grant application directly addresses item 5 of the VRA and is a prerequisite for items 3, 4, and 6 as the project is constructed. TxDOT and the City have been doing the work, have developed the local support, are committed to this project, and want to partner with FHWA.

Project Scope

The City of Houston is requesting funding from FHWA to ensure that TxDOT can build the infrastructure required to physically support future development of parks, greenspace, shade, and pedestrian and bicycle components designed to today's best practices. This grant application does not include capital costs for construction of future amenities; it ensures that the garden bridges, signature bridges, and bridge caps in this application are built to a specification that can physically support the future amenities that will stitch together Downtown Houston and the surrounding neighborhoods. The cost of future amenities and their operations and maintenance will be funded later through a combination of public and private investment. Without funding the current construction of this infrastructure during NHHIP, the envisioned future amenities will not be possible (see Figure 2). Fifteen of the 24 proposed NHHIP Connections in the application are located partially or wholly within a disadvantaged area and are eligible for 100% project funding through the NAE program, while the remaining nine NHHIP Connections would require a 20% local match of funds. (Overall, this would result in a 15% match for the grant application). This grant will support the joint efforts of the City and TxDOT to safely address the barriers posed by wide highways, support flood mitigation efforts, mitigate air quality impacts, and reduce urban heat island effects^{2, 3} along what would otherwise be plain concrete corridors across a complex system of highways. These benefits are described further in the section on Merit Criteria.