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Mobility coalition wants I-45 alternatives
Group supports saving homes, businesses
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A mobility coalition wants transportation planners to look at alternatives to widening I-45.

- One proposal: Installing managed lanes, which would be used as HOV and toll lanes, between downtown and Beltway 8; from Beltway 8 to FM 1960; and from FM 1960 to Texas 242**
- Second proposal: Twin, double-decker tunnels to replace the current I-45; some stretches could be used for hike-and-bike corridors**

Members of a coalition focused on improving mobility between downtown and The Woodlands say they would like to see transportation planners look at innovative alternatives to widening Interstate 45 so that neighborhoods and businesses along the route are preserved.

The North Corridor Coalition is a group of community-based business and civic organizations that support the implementation of the Metropolitan Transit Authority's 2025 System Plan and a mass transit system from downtown to The Woodlands.

They met Tuesday to gather information about the Texas Department of Transportation's Interstate 45 study results, and an alternate proposal by a local engineer to move traffic on that crowded freeway through an underground tunnel system.

Jack Drake, member of the North Corridor Coalition's steering committee, said the coalition is committed to working with TxDOT, Metro and various governmental agencies in finding solutions for Houston traffic problems.

He said the coalition is also a voice for the hundreds of thousands of businesses and residents along I-45 that will be affected by any project in that corridor.

"We need to make sure we do what we do to represent our interests," Drake said. "We made a commitment to work together."

Pat Henry, director of project development for TxDOT's Houston district, said the I-45 project is "in the very beginning stages of a 3-5-year study process."

He said the next step, if recent study results are approved and accepted into the Houston-Galveston Area Council's Metropolitan Transit Plan, is an

environmental impact study and design process, which will involve several public meetings.

Gonzalo Camacho, president of Camacho & Associates, a traffic and transportation engineering company, proposed building twin, double-decker tunnels to replace the current I-45.

Camacho's proposed 14.5-mile tunnels would run from downtown at U.S. 59 to Greenspoint, and the existing stretches of I-45 could be used for hike-and-bike corridors, roads for local traffic and a Metro rail line after the tunnels were operational.

Coalition comments

Both plans drew comments from North Corridor Coalition members.

Jim Weston, who represents the I-45 Coalition on the North Corridor Coalition's steering committee, said thousands of residents who live between Loop 610 and downtown are not happy with TxDOT's study results or its preferred alternative.

He said I-45 coalition members would like to see Camacho's proposal advanced to the feasibility study phase, so that TxDOT would seriously consider it as an alternative when the agency moves into the next phase of planning.

"We are in the tightest, most restricted area of I-45 — on one side you have a cemetery, and on our side there are commercial businesses for two blocks and then homes," said Weston, who lives in the Woodland Heights neighborhood.

"Our concern is that TxDOT (officials) keep telling us that it is too early to get upset, but if they say they want 12 lanes, they have to go somewhere. We signed a petition asking them to keep the road within the right of way, but it looks like they will run out of wiggle room."

Feasibility study

Weston said I-45 coalition members are worried that TxDOT would build the road straight across — in a pancake fashion — and not consider other alternatives, such as the tunnel concept.

Paula Lenz, a North Corridor Coalition member and executive director of the North Houston Association, which promotes projects and initiatives that support the business environment and improve the quality of life in north Harris and Montgomery counties, said she would like to see the North Corridor Coalition support a feasibility study on the tunnel concept.

"The tunnel concept is intriguing, and if there are some groups and interests willing to push for it, I am interested in hearing the results," Lenz said. "Would the results be considered by TxDOT in their environmental study process?"

Henry said a tunnel feasibility study would be considered if submitted to TxDOT in a public meeting or hearing.

He said the study team would also consider a variety of other ways to build the road within existing right of way, including building lanes above and below the existing freeway.

"We have said we would listen to the community's concerns and we will stick with that," Henry said. "We have heard your message."

Balance is key

Joe Wozny, a coalition member and representative of the Cy-Fair Houston Chamber of Commerce, said the key to making traffic flow in the I-45 corridor well into the future is balance.

He said TxDOT and other transportation agencies need to pursue projects to increase mobility, but also look at new, and possibly more expensive, alternatives that do not harm existing neighborhoods.

"At some point simply expanding a highway becomes impractical, and that is what we are looking at here," said Wozny.

"We need to look at the entire system and incorporate other alternatives, such as a mass transit system. This coalition has that balanced outlook — we look at what we are doing on freeways and in transit. There are a variety of solutions."

Drake said coalition members would meet in August to discuss backing a feasibility study on the tunnel concept, and would invite members of other entities along the corridor — the Near Northside Management District, Airline Corridor Management District, Aldine Improvement District and Houston Airport System to join the coalition's efforts to promote mobility along the north corridor.

Alternative solutions

TxDOT's preferred alternative for Interstate 45 calls for the installation of:

- Four managed lanes, which would be used as high-occupancy vehicle and toll lanes, between the eight general-purpose lanes from downtown to Beltway 8;**
- Two managed lanes in the center of a 10-lane stretch of I-45 between**

Beltway 8 and FM 1960;

•And two managed lanes and eight general-purpose lanes between FM 1960 and Texas 242.