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Issues loom in I-45 plan

TxDOT says adjustments to right of way will be addressed

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RESOURCES - TXDOT'S PREFERRED PLAN

(Source: Texas Department of Transportation)

The I-45 expansion project is designed to improve mobility along a 30-mile stretch of the I-45 corridor from downtown (Buffalo Bayou) to Texas 242 in Montgomery County. The Texas Department of Transportation's preferred alternative plan includes:

- Four managed lanes, which would be used as high-occupancy vehicle, Metropolitan Transit Authority bus 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.
- Two managed lanes and eight general-purpose lanes between FM 1960 and Texas 242.

More than 500 residents who live along the Interstate 45 corridor between downtown and the North Loop 610 voiced concerns at a meeting last week over the Texas Department of Transportation's plan to expand Interstate 45.

Residents packed the Jefferson Davis High School auditorium Aug. 13, at a public meeting hosted by the I-45 Coalition. It also drew elected officials, including U.S. Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Houston, and Gene Green, D-Houston; State Reps. Jessica Farrar, D-Houston, and Garnet Coleman, D-Houston; and City Council members Adrian Garcia and Gordon Quan.

They expressed many of the concerns residents have voiced for months over the expansion plan — primarily that it does not assess thoroughly the possibility TxDOT will purchase right of way for the expansion, and that those affected by the project have not had their concerns adequately addressed by the transportation department or its consultant, Carter and Burgess.

While TxDOT public engineer Hassan Nikooei and Carter and Burgess project manager Janet Kennison said the project's goal will include taking as little right of way as possible, John Wilson, executive director of the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention and a member of the Houston-Galveston Area Council's Technical Advisory Committee, said TxDOT's history and scope of the I-45 expansion plan prove that not to be the case.

"The recommended alternative seems to require lots more right of way," he said. "TxDOT's practice is to have three frontage roads in an urban setting. TxDOT's practice is to extend the frontage lanes wherever possible. The I-45 right of way at North Main is 75 yards. The proposed freeway with frontage roads in this section would be 131 yards. The minimum loss to the neighborhood is one block, stretching from North Main to Bayland.

"To build that schematic would involve taking a number of properties and pushing people who don't have property taken closer to the freeway without being compensated by TxDOT," he said.

Kennison said more right of way will likely be required along North Main and North Shepherd.

Nikooei said the issue of potentially taking right of way will be further addressed in the next stage of the process, which includes an environmental impact report and more accurate design schematics.

Community concerns

The controversy regarding TxDOT's plan further increased last month, when the department presented a "preferred alternative report" to the H-GAC's Technical Advisory Committee and Transportation Policy Council.

Community groups, including the I-45 Coalition and the Citizens Transportation Coalition, say TxDOT did not include in the report any of the neighborhood concerns that have arisen, nor did the department make available its report for community review before bringing it before the H-GAC for approval.

At last week's meeting, public officials and residents took TxDOT to task over what's in its report and what's left out.

"As I've seen some of the plans that have been submitted, I've got concerns over how public input has been reported in those plans," councilman Adrian Garcia said. "The public opinion they (TxDOT) are trying to report is not the public opinion I've heard. That's not right.

"The plan being proposed will do nothing but erase Northside as we know it," he added.

Said Coleman, "It appears to me the concern is with moving people from outside the area into downtown, not improving mobility within town. "

"We have severe doubts that this project enhances our downtown livability image," said Quan, who was present last week when the Citizen

Transportation Coalition appeared before the council to express its concerns.

Wilson called for a more detailed response to community concerns. Among other requests, he wanted more consideration to improvements to arterial roads along the corridor to ease freeway congestion.

"Freeways should be regional connectors, not local roads," Wilson said.

Wilson, who posted a copy of TxDOT's report on his group's Web site, echoed claims that the department was less than forthcoming regarding public input in its report to the H-GAC.

"When you asked questions, you were told to wait for the final report," he said. "Then the draft plan was released to the Technical Advisory Committee with no input from the community. I received a copy of it in the mail with a message not to share it. That angered me."

Cost estimates

Wilson also said cost estimates for the proposed project are unrealistic. TxDOT's report said expansion of 30 miles of I-45 will cost about \$600 million. In contrast, initial estimates for the widening of Interstate 10 in 2001 were \$1.3 billion. That figure has since grown to \$2.3 billion.

"The cost estimates seem dirt cheap," he said.

Nikooei said while public input has been and will continue to be considered as TxDOT moves forward with the process, the preferred alternative report was not submitted to community groups because it was identical to what residents saw at the October meetings.

"The difference is that in October it was a concept, and then it became the final decision," said Jim Weston, president of the I-45 Coalition. "There's a big difference."

Said Nikooei, "Communication from the public is taken very seriously. All public comments will be part of the final report. The right of way issue will be discussed during the design and environmental study stages. One of our major goals is to minimize right of way needs. TxDOT will make adjustments to any plans to best suit the neighborhoods along the corridor."