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**Engineer still wants an I-45 tunnel
Citizens group says plan addresses issues of flooding and air quality
By PATRICK KURP**

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Gonzalo Camacho remains convinced that running 14.5 miles of Interstate 45 under the ground would cost less, be built faster, displace fewer people and businesses, and create less air pollution than any conventional, above-ground road design.

"It's a no-brainer. It would be a large error that would be with us for a long time if the elected officials didn't get behind the tunnel idea," said Camacho, a transportation engineer and the most public proponent of making Houston home to the longest tunnel in the United States.

Camacho raised the idea in a public meeting in April and since has met with Texas Department of Transportation officials, the city's planning commission and community groups.

'Improved mobility' is goal

TxDOT has neither endorsed nor rejected consideration of a tunnel. Its recently completed I-45 study phase addressed only general topics, said spokeswoman Janelle Gbur. The preliminary conclusions called for adding four lanes to the stretch of I-45 between Sam Houston Tollway and downtown, though it did not specify truck lanes, toll lanes or additional HOV lanes.

"We have not reached that point in the process. It's a graduated process and the goal is improved mobility," said Gbur, who expects the department will issue a report on all proposed improvements to I-45, including the tunnel, about this time next year.

"We'll give all the ideas a good review, and nothing at that point will be eliminated purely on the basis of cost-effectiveness alone," she said.

The TxDOT study suggests that adding four "managed" lanes in the center of the freeway would reduce projected traffic levels on the main lanes in 2025 from 270,000 a day to 250,000.

Camacho insists that adding lanes to I-45 is merely a temporary measure, a "quick fix."

"More highway lanes is not a cure to the problem. These things run in 20-year cycles. In another 20 years, if not sooner, they'll want to add more lanes, then we're back to where we started," he said.

Robin Holzer, co-founder and chairman of the Citizens Transportation Coalition, said she was immediately impressed by Camacho's tunnel proposal.

"What we're interested in are alternatives that are in the interest of the neighborhood, that will benefit their quality of life. Where and how we design these projects has an enormous impact on people," Holzer said.

Flooding risks addressed

Holzer said the tunnel addresses many of her group's concerns — flooding risks, displacement of residents and businesses, and air quality. Tunnels are designed not to flood, with elevated entry and exit points. "There are lots of yucky things that come from living near a freeway. While I don't know if the tunnel is the best idea, but I'm sure there's a lot of interest in avoiding another Katy Freeway," she said.

Ken Lindow is a Realtor who lives in Woodland Heights and lives one block from I-45 and three minutes away (via I-45) from his office downtown. He belongs to both Holzer's group and the I-45 Coalition.

"The tunnel is really the only alternative. It's the only one that will help us meet the federal clean air mandates by 2007. All the talk about flooding is ridiculous. There are tunnels running under water. There are tunnels in places a lot wetter than Houston, like Malaysia," Lindow said.

Camacho agreed: "It's done all over the world. People think it's not possible in Houston, but the engineering expertise already exists. It can be done."

