

Summary^{1,2,3}

Houston is growing rapidly and its residents are frustratingly reliant on cars, averaging 75 hours per year stuck on the region's infamously congested highways.⁴ The state recognizes that these conditions necessitate action and this action is taking the form of the North Houston Highway Improvement Project. The plan aims to mitigate exorbitant congestion via realignment and road widening in the heart of Houston. Admittedly, the project would also displace numerous houses of worship, schools, businesses, and homes; negatively affect the local economy; and, most alarmingly, "cause disproportionate high and adverse impacts to minority or low-income populations" and those dependent on transit.⁵ Supporters of the plan argue the need for replacing aging infrastructure and relieving congestion for exurban commuters outweighs opponents' concerns over the burdens low-income communities that live, work, and play along the corridor will bear. Identifying common ground is crucial to creating a solution that better serves these varied needs and protects vulnerable people.

Environmental Issue

Urban interstates across the country present profound environmental justice issues. Footing 90% of the bill decades ago, the federal government emboldened states to build these excessive facilities in an effort to connect suburbs to urban cores while simultaneously preventing people of color and low-income folk from leaving fast-changing urban landscapes through vicious redlining policies. This growing popularity of cars, obsession with suburbanization, and the coinciding rapid construction of urban interstates was largely rooted in, contributed to, and reinforced the inequities that remain tangled in the fabric of our cities still today. Urban interstates also contribute to an excessively unsustainable, car dependent society. The implications of these choices did not end with the conclusion of construction nor with the passage of new protections. Today, externalities persist, threatening vulnerable communities. Those who rely on the mobility these facilities provide

are not those who suffer most from the associated social, economic, and environmental costs.⁶ With many Eisenhower era interstates aging beyond their useful life, many cities are asking, now what? Some have opted to tear down crumbling highways, making way for boulevards, parks, and housing as a way of restoring justice, reintroducing vibrancy, and easing auto dependency in historically disinvested, disenfranchised, and fractured communities. Others are doubling down, framing the urban interstate issue largely as a replacement one, proposing even bigger, more expensive designs in an effort to relieve congestion in their stubbornly auto-centric regions.⁷

Special Interest Groups

Supporters of highway widening include the American Highway Users Alliance, a national non-profit that lobbies for the sustained investment in the highway system, and local commuters vocal on the Houston Chronicle's comment threads. Organizations rallying for the project are not as formally defined, perhaps because of the state's existing support of the project. There are many groups organizing in opposition including, but not limited to, the Make I-45 Better Coalition, Texas Public Interest Research Group, Greater Houston Coalition for Justice, and Air Alliance Houston. Respectively, these are a group of concerned citizens and civic association representatives; an advocacy organization for a healthier, safer world; an association to create a world of justice; and an environmental justice non-profit. The Texas DOT and the Houston-Galveston Area Council are advancing the project forward cognizant of this opposition. The below table shows a breakdown of each side's argument.

Supporting groups	Dissenting groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdated, dangerous design elements and aging infrastructure along the corridor require prompt updating. • Mitigates current congestion and addresses population growth projections by increasing capacity. • If this money isn't used to try to fix the problem it will just be given to another city to rebuild their highway. • Improves evacuation routes in case of flood or other extreme weather events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project displaces thousands of homes and hundreds of businesses primarily owned by low-income people and communities of color. • Evidence suggests highway widening induces demand, not relieves congestion. • The up-front cost of \$7 billion and the life cycle maintenance costs are excessive. • Environmental justice concerns, higher flood risk from more impervious surfaces, and reduced air quality for residents.

Common Ground

This is an issue of means and ends. It seems almost everyone agrees that congestion and flooding are huge issues plaguing the Houston region requiring immediate attention and action. But disagreement exists on the means to those ends and the relative weight of other considerations. Leveraging common frustrations over congestion and implementing proven mitigation strategies, rather than business as usual, could be useful in meeting the diverse needs of Houston residents without destroying established communities.

Potential Strategy

There is a growing body of evidence that you cannot simply build your way out of congestion.⁸ But lessons can be learned from states that have implemented innovative projects that capitalize on this timely opportunity to rethink urban highways. Such states have developed holistic plans that encourage alternative modes, reconnect communities, add green space, and create surface boulevards.⁹ Creating a new, proudly multimodal plan that not only addresses old infrastructure for a lower cost, but also increases the accessibility to and quality of alternative modes, such as transit, walking, and biking, could appease both sides and create options for people who want to get out of their cars and traffic. The resulting reduction in impervious surfaces and more sustainable mode shares are also means to addressing concerns of resiliency.¹⁰ However, the state allocates the majority of its transportation fund to highways, meaning the many local leaders apprehensively backing the project admit there are strings attached, but worry about losing their place in line for Texas DOT dollars at a time when their aging facilities require prompt investments.¹¹ These political conditions eliminate the possibility of creatively addressing this congestion crisis, even if decision makers wanted to. Systemic change at the state level is needed to allow funds to support innovative thinking in Texas. This begins with clearly defined goals that focus less on the means and more on the ends: a healthy environment, equity, the ability of everyone to do the things they want and need to do. State leaders then need to rethink the means, both transportation and land use related. They also need to convince themselves of what they already know – expansion induces demand – and create options that will remove some cars by improving accessibility to alternative modes throughout the entire region with network wide improvements. This requires they be willing to live with a little congestion as a

necessary evil. A Texas sized highway won't solve congestion nor will full removal fix the lives of low-income residents along the corridor. But, a stronger, concerted effort to make all modes attractive and an ability to accept traffic, while updating aged infrastructure, could improve the lives of many, be more equitable, and be more sustainable.

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