



July 25th, 2017

Texas Department of Transportation
Attn: Quincy Allen, TxDOT Houston District Engineer

RE: Midtown Management District Comments on TxDOT NHHIP

Dear Mr. Allen,

Midtown Management District's (MMD) Board of Directors submits the following comments regarding the schematic design of the North Houston Highway Improvement Project as presented at the May 11th, 2017 public hearing. We support the efforts being made through the project design to minimize negative impacts on adjacent neighborhoods, including the depression and capping of the freeway in the Wheeler Station area and the retirement of the Pierce Elevated. However, we have some concerns about particular design elements that we believe should be reconsidered in order to provide the most beneficial project possible. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this input and look forward to continued engagement with the design process.

1) SH 288 Managed Lane Access

As currently proposed, the primary access to and egress from the SH 288 Managed Lanes would be provided on Chenevert St. south of Elgin St., adjacent to the Houston High School for International Studies and Baldwin Park. We believe this configuration is suboptimal for everyone involved. Drivers using the Managed Lanes will more likely be destined for Downtown than Midtown, or may be trying access another freeway to continue on. Either way, ending up on Chenevert St. will introduce unnecessary delay and confusion. Neighboring residents are already displeased with the presence of the existing freeway ramps which disrupt the neighborhood fabric and introduce unsafe vehicle speeds in a residential area. The proposed design would set this problem in concrete for another 50 years.

MMD's Board requests that TxDOT consider tying the Managed Lanes into the frontage roads (Hamilton St./ Chartres St.) between McGowen St. and Elgin St. Doing so would make access much more intuitive, improving the chances of success for the Managed Lane project. The Managed Lanes would gain an advantage over the main lanes in terms of moving the access point closer to Downtown. It would also give drivers headed toward Downtown or other connecting freeways a more convenient route for doing so than Midtown surface streets.

We understand that there are geometric challenges associated with this change. However, we feel there are feasible alternatives that would realign the ramps near Elgin St. by reconfiguring currently proposed exits to and from Chenevert St. and Hamilton St. One option to evaluate is to maintain the Tuam St. bridge as a bicycle and pedestrian connection but not traffic. This would allow the express lane ramps to pass over Tuam St. with less clearance, allowing them to tie into the frontage roads between Tuam St. and McGowen St. While Tuam St. would no longer allow passage of vehicles over the freeway, it would actually become a more comfortable bicycle and pedestrian route due to lower traffic volumes. This is consistent with the identification of Tuam St. as a shared bikeway in the Houston Bike Plan.

As part of the removal of the ramps from the neighborhood, Midtown requests that the grid of local streets be reconnected including Francis St., Chenevert St., and Holman St. Re-gridding the streets would create surplus land that TxDOT could sell for redevelopment or dedicate to the development of affordable housing as part of the replacement for Clayton Homes. Connecting Holman St. through to Hamilton St. would obviate the need for the freeway-style ramps connecting to Chenevert St. south of Holman St. Removing them would be more consistent with the context of the neighborhood while improving safety, reducing right-of-way acquisition, and creating more surplus right-of-way.

2) Heiner St. Bayou Access

While the planned project will remove the I-45 main lanes from the west side of downtown, the planned "downtown connectors," their ramps and related surface streets will have significant impacts on Buffalo Bayou, Sam Houston Park, Fourth Ward and Midtown. The existing I 45 right-of-way along Heiner St. between the Fourth Ward and Downtown is 300 feet wide and accommodates six elevated freeway lanes, four elevated ramp lanes, and five frontage road lanes with associated shoulders. In the proposed configuration, the facility through this section will only have five freeway connector lanes with shoulders and six frontage road lanes. This presents the opportunity to use the leftover space to create a transformational linear park connecting Midtown to Buffalo Bayou.

The greenway would connect at the northern end into the trail system of Buffalo Bayou Park and the extension of the Lamar St. separated bike lane, giving Midtown residents a high-comfort bike route to Downtown jobs and destinations. A connection under/across the downtown connector at Andrews St. would also improve Downtown access from Midtown and the Fourth Ward. At the south end, the greenway would link to the Bagby St. streetscape and the proposed Brazos St. bikeway extending through Midtown.

MMD's Board requests that the proposed Downtown Connector be designed with the minimum footprint possible in order to allow as much right-of-way as possible to be reserved for a linear park connection. We also request that a bicycle and pedestrian connection across the Downtown Connector in the vicinity of Andrews St. be incorporated into the design.

Given the opportunity to connect 4th Ward, Downtown and Midtown, we strongly encourage TxDOT to design the Downtown Connector appropriately for the dense, urban, mixed-use context of the area. We applaud TxDOT for reconfiguring the roadway network in this area, and encourage further evaluation if the Downtown Connector could be pushed north to end near W. Dallas St. and Allen Pkwy. This will allow for the historic street grid to be reconnected in the area south of W. Dallas St. Based on recent workshop with the Downtown District and Fourth Ward it is our understanding that such design concepts may be feasible.

3) Wheeler Transit Center Area

The area around METRO's Wheeler Transit Center has the potential to be a hub of activity in Midtown but thus far has been hindered by the elevated freeway and the uncertainty around future infrastructure plans like the University Line. The NHHIP proposes to move the freeway below grade in this section, reducing noise and visual impacts along the border of Midtown and the Museum District and benefiting the prospect of development. The Museum Park Livable Center Study outlines this opportunity that can be envisioned soon since this is the first project where construction is expected to start as soon as 2020. However, details including ramps, bridges, and street connections will need to be worked out to enable the greatest potential for transit-oriented development around the station.

We appreciate you meeting with the city, METRO and stakeholder to discuss options and look forward to working with you to identify the design that improves circulation and accessibility for all modes of transportation around the Wheeler Transit Center.

4) Connections to Adjoining Neighborhoods

Midtown is pleased that connections to our neighbors in Downtown and Museum Park stand to improve considerably in the proposed design. We wish to ensure that the project bridges the gap to the Third Ward to our west, as well. We request that the proposed bridges between Midtown and the Third Ward be designed in a way that improves multimodal connectivity. This means including space for bike lanes on Almeda St., Alabama St., McGowen St., Tuam St. (should the bridge retain a vehicular purpose), and Gray St. as specified in the Houston Bike Plan. It also means making sure sidewalks across the bridges are wide enough to provide comfortable separation from traffic. On the bridges crossing the wide 59-288 trench, including landscaping or shade structures would improve what can now be a scorching 500-foot tightrope walk along the existing bridge sidewalks.

Elgin St. could be the focus of the most extensive bike/ped treatments in order to create a linkage between Baldwin and Emancipation Parks. While capping the freeway may not be realistic in this segment, an extra wide bridge with landscaping and art could create the feel of a park connection on top of the freeway, helping Midtown residents

access the amazing new recreational facilities in development at Emancipation Park and Third Ward residents reach the tranquil groves in Baldwin Park.

5) Pierce Elevated

MMD is excited about the opportunity created by the realignment of I-45. We are exploring options with the city and adjacent neighborhoods on the best solution that would meet the goals of the city and our neighborhoods regarding the retirement of the Pierce Elevated. We look forward to working with you over the next few years to discuss options along this corridor since this is the last phase of the NHHIP Segment 3 project.

6) Proposed bridges across I 69 and SH 288

It is not clear if TxDOT has studied the impact and needs to the local roadway network and roadway capacity to the same level of the freeway itself. The bridges across the freeway should be designed based on capacity considerations of the existing roadway and the city's roadway classification identified in the Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan. A number of bridges across the freeway are oversized. For example, Caroline St. functions as a local or minor collector street. with on-street. parking and is designated as a neighborhood bikeway. It is shown on the schematic widened to 4 lanes plus dedicated left turn lanes at Wheeler St.

Wheeler St. across I 69 needs to be designed to accommodate a future University Corridor transit line consistent with METRO's current long range plan. Roadway capacity on other bridges should be designed to the context and the classification of the street. Additionally, all bridges should have wide sidewalks instead of the minimum standards and incorporate dedicated bike facilities.

7) Other considerations

The project's design should recognize that this is one of the most densely populated and historic areas of Houston. The freeway surface should be design to reduce road noise with solutions such as grooved pavement to mitigate noise impact on the adjoining neighborhoods. The project should improve traffic safety with reduced speed limits as freeway traffic approaches the city street network. All surface streets should be designed as complete streets, not freeway frontage roads. Roadway alignments and the project scope should allow for street trees and urban-sided sidewalks and high comfort bikeway consideration. In general, the design of all structures should be high-quality and compatible with the surrounding urban and historic fabric.

Midtown's residents reflect the diversity of Houston with both baby-boomers and millennials calling Midtown home. Residents, businesses, and visitors enjoy a sustainable, walkable community with a thriving arts and entertainment scene and green oases. Since 2012, Midtown Houston has experienced 50% population growth with almost 10,000 Houstonians now calling it home. We would like to ensure that all intersections of frontage roads and city streets be designed to enhance safe accessibility of people of all ages and abilities, and all users of the roadway. We hope TxDOT will continue to coordinate with MMD through the design phase of the project and especially the construction phase given the likely impacts to our residents and businesses.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to offer input into the NHHIP project and your willingness to consider measures to reduce the highway's impacts on it neighbors. We hope incorporating the comments into the Final EIS and design will improve the project and the quality of life of our residents.

Thank you,
Matt Thibodeaux
Executive Director, Midtown Management District

cc: Allen Douglas, Midtown Management District Board Member and Urban Planning Committee Chair