



# **Public Hearing Summary Report**

## **SH 288 Direct Connectors To the Texas Medical Center Area**

**City of Houston  
Harris County, Texas**

**CSJ: 0598-01-095**

**Prepared for  
Texas Department of Transportation-  
Houston District**

**July 2013**

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## PUBLIC HEARING SUMMARY

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), Houston District, conducted a public hearing concerning the proposed SH 288 direct connectors to the Texas Medical Center area on June 27, 2013, in the cafeteria at the Michael E. DeBakey High School for Health Professions located at 3100 Shenandoah in Houston, Texas. The purpose of the hearing was to present the recommended alternative alignments for public view and comment.

### Project Description

The proposed project would consist of the construction of two tolled direct connectors: a northbound connector from SH 288 to westbound Holcombe Boulevard and a southbound connector from eastbound Holcombe Boulevard to SH 288. It is anticipated that 3.26 acres of additional right-of-way would be required for the project and three commercial displacements would occur.

### Alternatives Analysis

Six alternatives were evaluated and presented in a public meeting on January 24, 2013. The alternatives included reversible direct connector options that connected to a variety of local streets including Holcombe Boulevard, Hermann Drive, Old Spanish Trail, Ardmore Street, Alice Street, and the SH 288 frontage roads. Each of these alternatives was evaluated for cost, impacts to the environment, and displacement of businesses and residences. The alternatives were evaluated for effectiveness in reducing congestion and improving access to the area. And finally, the input received from the public was considered in the selection of a recommended alternative.

### Recommended Alternative

The recommended alternative is a combination of the Ardmore Street and Holcombe Boulevard Alternatives presented at the Public Meeting. This recommended alternative consists of two tolled direct connectors: a connection from eastbound Holcombe Boulevard to the southbound SH 288 toll lanes and a connection from the northbound SH 288 toll lanes to westbound Holcombe Boulevard. This option is recommended because it represents the least impact to businesses and communities, provides improved traffic operations, and since the connectors will be non-reversible, they will provide 24-hour access. Construction of the direct connectors would be completed mid-2017. The estimated project cost is 28 million dollars.

The Notice of Public Hearing was published on May 26, 2013, and June 16, 2013, in the Houston Chronicle (in English); on June 2 and 16, 2013, in the *La Voz* Spanish newspaper (in Spanish); as well as, May 30, 2013, and June 20, 2013, in the *Houston Chronicle* community newspaper (in English) for zip code 77021, which encompasses the project area. The notices and the affidavits of publication are attached (see Appendices A and B). In addition, the notices were mailed to elected officials in the project area (see Appendix C) and adjacent property owners (see Appendix D).

The public hearing held an open house from approximately 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. to allow for questions and viewing of project exhibits. Exhibits included a welcome board, the need and purpose, the project description, typical sections, estimated project schedule, environmental constraints map, environmental analysis process, and the recommended alignments of the

direct connectors. Additionally, project management staff was available to provide information and answer questions from citizens regarding the proposed project. A formal presentation began at 7:00 pm followed by a public comment period. The public hearing concluded at 7:50 pm.

A registration desk was located at the entrance of the cafeteria where attendees were invited to sign-in. Each person was provided with a pre-addressed comment form to share their thoughts regarding the proposed project, and a program, which contained a brief description and purpose of the proposed project and a map showing the recommended alternative. Handouts provided at the public hearing were available in English and Spanish. Individuals, who wished to make a verbal comment during the public comment period, filled out a speaker registration card and gave it to a project team member. Five elected officials/representatives, two members of the media and 101 members of the public signed in at the hearing. Thirteen individuals registered to speak during the comment period, but two of them declined to speak when their name was called. The programs and exhibits are included in Appendix E. Sign-in forms and speaker cards are included in Appendix F. Photographs of the public hearing are included in Appendix G. Copies of the public hearing transcript and the slideshow presentation can be found in Appendices H and I, respectively.

## **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

The public was encouraged to ask questions and make comments. All verbal questions and comments were responded to individually during the open house portion of the hearing. As stated previously, thirteen individuals registered to speak during the comment period portion of the formal presentation, but two of them declined to speak when their name was called (see Appendix H for the speaker's comments in the public hearing transcript). Twelve public hearing comment forms were submitted at the public hearing and fourteen comments were submitted via regular mail or e-mail. The deadline for submitted comments and e-mails was July 12, 2013.

The written questions/comments received are attached (see Appendix J) and responses to the questions and comments are summarized below. Some of the respondents expressed similar comments. For clarity, similar comments were grouped together. Each comment form/e-mail/letter was numbered and the responses below include the numbers of all the comment forms addressed by the response.

*Comment 1:* Commenters asked if other projects have been considered in this direct connector study. These projects included public transportation options, METRO transit projects, light rail, and parking facilities at the Texas Medical Center (see comment forms 1, 19 and 23).

*Response 1:* METRO transit projects such as light rail and park and ride projects are controlled by the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO) and not under the jurisdiction of TxDOT. Light rail is already in the area and METRO is expanding their light rail system across the city.

*Comment 2:* Some commenters expressed preference for other possible direct connectors as opposed to the recommended alternative presented at the public hearing. These connectors included a direct connector off of Old Spanish Trail (OST), Alice Street, and direct connectors at 610 Loop or south of the Loop (see comment forms 10, 11, 13, 15, 22, 23 and 26).

*Response 2:* The future direct connector off of Alameda Road is part of another project. The direct connectors south of the 610 Loop would not fulfill the need and purpose of the project as the direct connector would terminate too far south of the Texas Medical Center. The OST and Alice alternatives were evaluated but not considered because of a greater number of displacements and the cost of bridging the rail line.

*Comment 3:* Several commenters stated that the direct connectors would cause additional traffic and congestion affecting the daily commuters as well as impacting businesses and neighborhoods adjacent the project (see comment forms 3, 6, 10, 17, 19, 21, 23, 24, and 25).

*Response 3:* The direct connector would provide a designated route for traffic commuting into and out of the Texas Medical Center area. This improvement would accommodate existing and future traffic needs. Since the traffic destined for the Texas Medical Center area would use the designated route, it is anticipated that the surrounding roadway network traffic could experience a lower level of congestion. Needed capacity improvements would be made along this route to bring the level of service to an acceptable level and facilitate smooth traffic flow.

*Comment 4:* Some commenters asked about possible visual, noise and air impacts by the proposed project (see comment forms 4, 5, 7 and 23).

*Response 4:* The environmental document being prepared for the proposed direct connectors includes a noise analysis to determine if impacts would occur to residential and commercial receivers along the project length. The noise analysis has not been completed at this time. If noise impacts are identified, noise mitigation would be considered for impacted receivers. If a noise wall is considered reasonable and feasible, a noise wall would be recommended. If recommended, adjacent property owners would have the opportunity to attend a Noise Workshop to find out more about the proposed noise barrier(s) and decide if they want the barrier. At this time it is anticipated that air impacts would not be substantial due to the amount of traffic projected to be on the direct connector.

A prior TxDOT modeling study and previous analyses of similar projects demonstrated that it is unlikely that a carbon monoxide standard would ever be exceeded as a result of any project with an average annual daily traffic (AADT) below 140,000. The AADT projections for the project do not exceed 140,000 vehicles per day; therefore a Traffic Air Quality Analysis was not required.

According to TxDOT's *Landscape and Aesthetics Design Manual* (October 2012), the goal of the transportation designer is to fit the highway or other facility into the adjacent landscape in a way that is complementary to, and enhances, the existing landscape.

Currently, the direct connectors will have a wave design motif similar for the new SH 288 corridor.

*Comment 5:* Two commenters inquired about the project's economic impact on small businesses, specifically denial of access to the Burger King (see comments form 3 and 25).

*Response 5:* It is not anticipated that any long term significant impacts would occur to adjacent small business owners. Although the Burger King would lose the access to Ardmore Street, it would retain access to Holcombe Boulevard.

*Comment 6:* A commenter suggested that the construction of the project onto Holcombe Boulevard is not a TxDOT issue since Holcombe Boulevard is city street and the Texas Medical Center is not a state funded institution (see comment form 17).

*Response 6:* One of the responsibilities of TxDOT is to construct connections from the state highway system (SH 288) to local city streets (Holcombe Boulevard) and county roads. These construction projects are common throughout the State.

*Comment 7:* One commenter noted that the recommended alternative design did not have direct connectors for southbound SH 288 (see comment form 18).

*Response 7:* The proposed project does provide a fully directional interchange; however, the project proposes a southbound connector from eastbound Holcombe Boulevard to southbound 288. The ramp from southbound 288 to Holcombe Boulevard was widened to a two-lane exit ramp as part of a previous construction project.

*Comment 8:* A commenter suggested SH 288 connectors be constructed in conjunction with the SH 288 widening project (see comment form 16).

*Response 51:* The SH 288 direct connector project would be constructed in tandem with the SH 288 widening project. The connectors would tie into the proposed managed lanes of SH 288.

*Comment 9:* A commenter recommended that the original Holcombe Boulevard alternative be selected instead of the recommended alternative (see comment form 14).

*Response 9:* The original Holcombe Boulevard alternative was eliminated as a viable alternative due to the fact that a reversible direct connector at this location would require a substantial amount of right-of-way, involve bridging the rail line, and would significantly impact access to adjacent properties.

*Comment 10:* A commenter stated that the recommended alternative would likely impact the trails along Brays Bayou (see comment form 20).

*Response 10:* No Right-of-Way (ROW) will be required from the area adjacent to Brays Bayou. The trails would not be impacted by the proposed project.

Comment 11: A commenter stated that the recommended alternative was too costly (see comment form 9).

Response 11: The recommended alternative was actually less than many alternatives put forth during the alternatives analysis due to less ROW acquisition, fewer building displacements, the cost of bridging the rail line, which is not required in the recommended alternative.

Comment 12: The Citizen's Transportation Coalition (CTC) recommended the no build alternative for the proposed project. Many of the concerns noted in the previous comments were outlined in the CTC comment. In addition the CTC stated that the recommended alternative failed to meet the purpose and need outlined in the Environmental Assessment (EA). The CTC then stated that this project cannot proceed as a Categorical Exclusion (CE) (see comment form 23).

Response 12: This project was not covered in the EA for the SH 288 toll lanes. The SH 288 direct connectors project is a completely separate project and requires independent environmental review and documentation. Under the current TxDOT/FHWA guidelines for environmental documentation, the proposed project qualifies for environmental processing as a CE. Currently the environmental document is being drafted for review by TxDOT and FHWA.

*Comment 13:* A commenter supported the project (see comment form 8).

*Response 13:* Comment noted.

*Comment 13:* Two commenters opposed the project (see comment form 12 and 26).

*Response 13:* Comment noted.

*Comment 14:* A commenter was undecided on the project (see comment form 2).

*Response 14:* Comment noted.