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OPINION // OUTLOOK

Houston needs the I-45 expansion [Opinion]

By Oscar Slotboom | Aug. 3, 2019 | Updated: Aug. 7, 2019 9:22 p.m.



Interstate 45 intersects Interstate 610, near the Independence Heights neighborhood, lower right, seen on Friday, July 5, 2019, in Houston. Photo: Jon Shapley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

The North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) will rebuild the downtown freeway system and Interstate 45 north to Beltway 8. As TxDOT nears the end of the 17-year process to develop plans for the project, it's a good time to spotlight the huge benefits this planned project will provide to motorists, downtown and adjacent neighborhoods.

First and foremost is mobility. Houston's downtown freeways were designed in the 1950s and 1960s to serve motorists going to and leaving downtown, not trips which pass through downtown. But today 67 percent of weekday peak-period vehicles using downtown freeways pass through downtown, and these trips are virtually impossible to serve with traditional public transit.

The NHHIP will redesign downtown freeways to serve today's needs and relieve congestion, with average speed increases up to 24 miles per hour expected during peak periods. This will not only reduce the frustration and costs of congestion, but also provide important economic benefits since Houstonians will have more opportunities to access jobs which require trips through downtown, and employers will have access to a larger pool of potential workers who will be able to travel through downtown.

The NHHIP will be highly beneficial to Midtown by sinking the existing I-69 elevated freeway into a trench, removing the elevated structure which has often been a location for homeless communities. The new lanes included in this section will relieve the chronic backups which occur on the inbound side of I-69.

The NHHIP will retire the Pierce Elevated as a transportation corridor, allowing stakeholders to decide its future to maximize the corridor's benefit to the community, either by removing the existing structure or converting it into a linear elevated park, which could potentially become one of the most distinctive urban parks in the United States.

Where I-69 and SH 288 merge together, new arched bridges with pedestrian-friendly sidewalks will provide an architectural highlight to enhance neighborhood identity.

On the east side of downtown the NHHIP will remove one mile of elevated freeway and place the freeway below ground level, providing the opportunity for new community spaces on platforms that can be built above the freeway, with the potential for a focal point similar to Dallas's highly successful Klyde Warren Park.

The NHHIP will substantially reduce the number of highway structures along the present I-45 on the west side of downtown in the area of Allen Parkway and Memorial, opening up more space for use as parks.

On the north side of downtown, the consolidation of the two east-west railroad corridors into a single corridor north of I-10 will remove the railroad through UH-Downtown and the warehouse district. The railroad removal, northward realignment of the freeway and separately proposed north canal will provide the opportunity for transformative new development.

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Just north of downtown at North Main Street, a potential park over the freeway will reconnect the neighborhoods currently separated by the freeway trench.

From the Loop northward, the freeway and frontage roads will meet modern standards with replacement of the antiquated Loop 610 interchange, new managed lanes and more efficient intersections at cross streets. Safety improvements include full shoulders and better-designed merging zones.

The NHHIP adds only limited new general-purpose lanes to the freeways, mainly in bottleneck locations. New capacity is primarily managed lanes similar to the highly successful managed lanes on the Katy Freeway. Managed lanes are optimized for transit and carpool use, and the NHHIP will provide valuable new options for public transit in the North Freeway corridor, potentially including high-speed express bus service to Bush Airport. The North Freeway will be ready for new transportation technologies of the future, such as automated cars, which will be well-suited for use in managed lanes.

While the NHHIP is expensive, with a price tag around \$3.9 billion for the downtown work and \$7 billion overall, its huge benefits make it a vital investment in Houston's future. TxDOT's 2020 Unified Transportation Program has allocated \$4.7 billion to the project for construction in the 2020s with work beginning in Midtown and proceeding northward. This funding can be used only for highway projects, and if the NHHIP does not proceed to construction this once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve these benefits for Houston could be permanently lost since the funding will likely be redistributed to projects in outlying areas of the Houston region, and possibly to rural Interstate improvements outside of Houston, such as I-69. Let's move forward with the North Houston Highway Improvement Project as soon as possible to achieve better mobility, a better downtown and more opportunity for Houstonians.

Slotboom is author of the 2003 book Houston Freeways, A Historical and Visual Journey, available for free download at HoustonFreeways.com. He works as a web and software developer.

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Mr. Slotboom makes it all sound so wonderful. And indeed it would be if the NHHIP could be constructed overnight with the swish of a magic wand. But there's a harsh reality to this project. It will take ten years or more to complete, during which the city will become a massive construction zone, the scale of which is unprecedented.