

LINK HOUSTON

March 4, 2020

Via Email: publiccomments@h-gac.com

Mr. Alan Clark
Director Transportation Planning
Houston-Galveston Area Council

RE: Draft 2021-2024 Transportation Improvement Program

Dear Mr. Clark,

The following are LINK Houston's comments regarding the Houston-Galveston Area Council's (H-GAC) draft 2021-2024 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). LINK Houston advocates for a robust and equitable transportation network so that all people can reach opportunity. LINK Houston provides these comments as a member of the H-GAC Technical Advisory Committee, as a member of the Make I-45 Better Coalition, and in support of the many people and communities in Houston who rely on walking, biking, and riding transit to access opportunity.

The Transportation Improvement Program is where the rubber meets the road in transportation. It is the actual list of projects from the regional call-for-projects/regional transportation plan that the region is putting forth for actual funding and construction in the next few years.

Local and State Policy Change is Needed – and Resources to Go with It

We understand the TIP process is a routine mechanism to program lists of projects of all types, including for people walking, biking, and transit. If the transportation process were a pipeline the TIP is the water coming out of the spigot. The most significant opportunity to change what comes out of the pipeline is to change where the water is put in. LINK Houston is concerned that the proposed TIP generally continues to invest in roadway expansion, whether highways or major local streets, instead of allocating more resources to projects that improve affordable, urban transportation to support walking, biking, riding transit. Voter support for METRONext (68% percent), civic engagement around the North Houston Highway Improvement Project, the 2045 Active Transportation Plan, and the work of the H-GAC High Capacity Transit Task Force all demonstrate strong and growing support for doing things differently in Houston and the region.



While there is a growing and clear local support for local and high-capacity transit in Harris County and the region, the State of Texas provides no state funds for such projects in metropolitan areas with populations over 200,000 people. There is a clear need for advocacy directed towards state officials to change policy and allocate resources.

We exhort H-GAC and its stakeholders to communicate these changing expectations to state officials to pursue policy changes that unlock State of Texas funds for multi-modal projects in metropolitan areas.

Too Much Money for Roadway Expansion – Out of Line with Public Goals and Interest

As documented in Table 2-1, the proposed TIP allocates about \$8.6 billion toward roadway focused projects (admittedly there are some that include transit, sidewalks, and bikeways) and only \$1.2 billion to transit focused projects (that also include sidewalks, bikeways). The TIP funds the North Houston Highway Improvement Program (NHHIP or I-45 N expansion) Segment 3 and parts of Segment 2, despite the project having serious, ongoing civic engagement to address fundamental goals and proposed design.

Projects with a federal funding role focus heavily on highways, perhaps underutilizing their general flexibility, which is complicated by the State of Texas recategorizing federal funds to a variety of pools. ...

- Projects using federal highway dollars are the vast majority of the total \$7.7 billion, \$1.4 billion of which is state money.

[The \$1.4 billion from state sources. Some of these projects include small transit, walk/bike, and city street elements.]

- Projects using federal transit dollars are \$0.8 billion – **literally 1/10th that for highways and regional arterial roadways.**

[The State of Texas allocates zero (\$0) state dollars to support metropolitan transit projects. The amount of federal money for transit projects has grown gradually over the decades but remains far less than for highways. Both conditions require and need policy changes.]

Projects using only local money still focus heavily on highways and major streets, in part as a result of local jurisdictions proposing projects under an old paradigm of roadway expansion...

- Projects using only local highway funds are \$1.5 billion.

[Zero (\$0) from state sources. Some of these projects also include small transit, walk/bike, and city street elements.]

- Projects using only local transit funds are \$0.13 billion – **literally 1/12th that for local highways.**

[Zero (\$0) from state sources. Some of these projects include walk/bike and city street elements.]

We need a better pipeline of projects in the region – one driven by the actual goals of the Regional Transportation Plan and that more heavily centers transit and complete streets.

Texas Department of Transportation Must Do Better at Estimating Cost and Takes Advantage of H-GAC Processes and Traditions

Government stakeholders involved in H-GAC's regionally significant transportation work understand that sometimes the unforeseen arises, policy changes, public priorities change, or etc. and that such occurrences may change the cost of a transportation project. It happens. What should not happen is the largest single stakeholder in a region, in terms of project dollars, comes to decisionmakers to request support for large cost increases – routinely.

In the draft TIP most of the projects with increased costs are from TxDOT. **TxDOT's request is 25 percent higher cost than originally planned during the call-for-projects just last year.** Why is our state's Department of Transportation the worst at estimating costs? If the increased cost is legitimate, such as to mitigate for climate impacts and flooding, perhaps the planned project should be adapted to reduce its impact. Mitigation need not mean more land for more water detention, necessitating right-of-way takings and displacement. Regardless of the reason, H-GAC and stakeholders should hold each other accountable to stay within budget. The budgeted amount from the call-for-projects was used to rank and select projects in that process. Frequently and routinely accommodating significant increases in cost indicates underlying transparency and accountability issues and inequities in the transportation planning and programming process.

Conclusion

This letter related LINK Houston's comments and concerns on the draft 2021-2024 Transportation Improvement Program.

- There is a growing and clear local support for local and high-capacity transit in Harris County and region but the State of Texas provides no state funds for such projects in metropolitan areas with populations over 200,000 people – there is a

clear need for advocacy and education to state officials to change policy and allocate resources.

- The proposed TIP continues the historical trend of spending multiples more on roadway expansion than on facilities for people walking, biking, and riding transit in existing communities. The TIP is the end of a pipeline that needs better, more equitable projects going into the pipe through the next Call-for-Projects and amendment to the 2045 Regional Transportation Plan.
- H-GAC and stakeholders should hold each other more accountable to stay within budget. The budgeted amount from the call-for-projects was used to rank and select projects in that process. Frequently and routinely accommodating significant increases in cost indicates underlying issues and inequities in the transportation planning and programming process.

LINK Houston provides these comments based on our own organization's mission to advocate for a robust and equitable transportation network so that all people can reach opportunity. We believe every major infrastructure project using taxpayer dollars is an opportunity to improve the quality of life in the surrounding neighborhoods. Many of the region's residents are non-drivers or walk, bike, and use transit because they want or need to. Transportation infrastructure will continue to influence access to opportunity and quality of life, including health and wellness in Harris County. We hope that as time progresses H-GAC, its stakeholders, and public will converge on improving transportation for people who need it most in existing communities

Sincerely,

Jonathan P. Brooks
Director of Policy and Planning
LINK Houston