

# North Houston Highway Improvement Project/I-45 Expansion Independence Heights Advocacy Strategy



Photo Credit: Houston Chronicle

## Preserve Neighborhood History and Heritage of Independence Heights

**Concern.** As the first city incorporated by African Americans in the state of Texas, Independence Heights is a place of heritage and culture. By building over historic land in favor of expanding highway infrastructure, the proposed North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) sacrifices American history. Lower Independence Heights, recognized by the federal government in the National Registered Historic District for its significance in U.S. history, should be protected and preserved under the requirement of the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. Preservation efforts should also extend to cultural sites, such as the Greater Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church. Located along I-610 North Loop in the Southeast corner of Independence Heights, Greater Mount Olive has been a part of the community for over 100 years and provides a community gathering space, assists homeless children in local schools, and even served as a disaster recovery center following Hurricane Harvey. Severely damaged during Hurricane Ike in 2008, the church was finally rebuilt in 2016.

Potential Mitigation Strategies	Advocacy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserve existing buildings and land in place by rerouting any highway improvements around these structures.</li> <li>• Install community gateway projects including murals, sound walls, signage, and monuments to reinforce the historical importance of the Independence Heights neighborhood.</li> <li>• Designate historic buildings in Independent Heights to protect the community from future encroachment; historic houses should be designated as individual City of Houston Landmarks.</li> <li>• Avoid the NHHIP's construction impeding on the Greater Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church and its congregation; if displacement is inevitable, sufficiently compensate for acquisition and relocation costs.</li> <li>• Develop a pocket park for the Independence Heights Community that emphasizes the history and contributions of the church.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Governor Abbott</b> appoints the Texas Transportation Commission, which serves as the governing board of Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and develops a statewide plan for all modes of transportation. Contact <b>Governor Abbott, Texas Transportation Commission Commissioner Laura Ryan</b> (responsible for the Houston area), or <b>Chair of the Commission Bruce Bugg</b> about big picture issues on the impact of highways and long-term concerns about transportation projects like this one. The project significantly impacts <b>Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis's</b> precinct and the <b>U.S. Congressmembers Sheila Jackson-Lee's</b> district. Mayor Turner oversees the <b>City of Houston Planning and Development Department</b>, which enforces the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The <b>Texas Historical Commission</b> approves designation of historic markers based on recommendation of the <b>Harris County Historical Commission (THC)</b>, whose membership is appointed by <b>Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo</b>. <b>TxDOT-Houston District Engineer Quincy Allen</b> oversees TxDOT's Houston District Office.</p> <p><i>See last page for contact information and meeting information.</i></p>

## Keep Homes in Place

**Concern.** Over time, highway construction has eroded the historical community of Independence Heights. The neighborhood has seen a pattern of government agencies taking from residents in order to build infrastructure, including highways that don't serve the community but are rather designed to move people through Independence Heights and into suburbs. Continual property acquisitions and rising land prices make it difficult for families to relocate within the community, displacing residents from their families and support networks, negating efforts to densify the population and attract economic investments, and further eroding the neighborhood's history, culture, and resources.

Potential Mitigation Strategies	Advocacy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with the city's community land trust organization to protect Independence Heights from speculative development and gentrification. Employ the land trust to provide affordable housing for families and ensure that those displaced by the NHHIP can find other suitable residences within the community boundaries.</li> <li>• Construct a variety of housing opportunities, including single and multi-family homes.</li> <li>• Urge City of Houston to support the creation and strengthening of vital infrastructure projects to improve walkability and safety of residential streets.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Houston Community Land Trust</b> connects income-qualified homebuyers to available affordable housing that includes long-term provisions keeping it perpetually owned within families. <b>Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner</b> oversees the <b>Housing and Community Development Department</b>, which along with the federally funded <b>Houston Housing Authority</b>, supports the design and construction of housing developments for low-income individuals and families.</p> <p><i>See last page for contact information and meeting information.</i></p>

## Promote Business and Economic Development

**Concern.** The NHHIP threatens to displace vital businesses in Independence Heights, including childcare providers, general stores, local eateries, and other supportive services. Without businesses to provide essential goods, services, and employment opportunities, Independence Heights risks increased displacement, economic hardship and a lower quality-of-life for residents.

Potential Mitigation Strategies	Advocacy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep Independence Heights-based businesses operating within the community; properly compensate local business owners if displaced.</li> <li>• Focus economic development initiatives on developing the workforce, maintaining access to shops and restaurants important to community culture, and preventing local businesses from leaving the neighborhood.</li> <li>• Develop signage highlighting historical community business owners.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo</b> and <b>Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner</b> engage with TxDOT to ensure that highway projects, including this one, benefit their jurisdictions economically and should be told by communities if the projects do not. Job and business losses of this magnitude, with little opportunity to counter the downturn, should capture the attention of the <b>Greater Houston Partnership</b>.</p> <p><i>See last page for contact information and meeting information.</i></p>

# North Houston Highway Improvement Project/I-45 Expansion

## Independence Heights

### Advocacy Strategy



#### Mitigate Flooding of Little White Oak Bayou and Local Streets

**Concern.** Little White Oak Bayou is a tributary of White Oak Bayou that runs through Independence Heights. Consequently, 63.4% of Independence Heights land parcels are located within the 100-year floodplain. Due to the current lack of adequate flood control, Independence Heights has suffered threats from different buyouts along Little White Oak Bayou for freeway expansion and flood control. Additionally, heavy rains result in neighborhood flooding due to the inadequacy of the culvert installed under the I-45/I-10 interchange in 1962. Despite initiatives to address flooding, many homes in Independence Heights will remain located in floodplain, resulting in disruption of the social cohesion of Independence Heights, as well as families being subject to residential displacement, property buyouts, and forced relocation.

Potential Mitigation Strategies	Advocacy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborate with the Independence Heights community to create pocket parks that increase green space and provide flood detention.</li> <li>Develop a flood warning system to help residents along Little White Oak Bayou prepare for heavy rain and get to safety in a timely manner.</li> <li>Include in the NHHIP corrections to flood control to rectify prior mistakes as a result of freeway construction, including continued backwater/bottlenecking at Little White Oak Bayou which directly affects homes in the neighborhood.</li> <li>Create larger culverts, green spaces, and infiltration systems; repurpose vacant lots and brownfields to serve these functions.</li> <li>Construct any new infrastructure at minimum to Harris County's 500-year flood standard.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo</b> and <b>Houston Mayor Turner</b> both have significant influence over flood mitigation. <b>TxDOT District Engineer Quincy Allen</b>, <b>Harris County Flood Control District</b>, and <b>City of Houston's Floodplain Management Office</b> are counterparts with important expertise to share on many major aspects of flood mitigation.</p> <p><i>See last page for contact information and meeting information</i></p>

#### Promote Student Health

**Concern.** The NHHIP would bring 26 school campuses, including Roosevelt Elementary, within 500 feet of freeways. The construction and increased traffic following project completion will lead to higher concentrations of pollutants, which are linked to respiratory and circulatory illnesses. Some children who attend these schools already suffer from respiratory illnesses, such as asthma. Expanding the highway will only exacerbate health problems, which will also impact students' academic success and livelihoods.

Potential Mitigation Strategies	Advocacy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Place vegetative barriers, including tree lines, along I-45.</li> <li>Install High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters and air monitors in sensitive areas within 500 feet of the freeway, such as schools and parks.</li> <li>Locate construction staging areas at least 500 feet away from sensitive areas and require low-emission equipment.</li> <li>Establish "no-idle zones" around school campuses.</li> </ul>	<p>Under <b>Director of Transportation Planning Alan Clark</b>, the Houston-Galveston Area Council is responsible for leading a team that must model transportation projects proving "attainment" for regional air quality in accordance with state standards administered by the <b>Texas Commission on Environmental Quality</b> and the federal Clean Air Act administered by the <b>U.S. Environmental Protection Agency</b>. <b>Judge Hidalgo</b> has made climate resilience a key platform issue. <b>TxDOT</b> also installs plant vegetation as a mitigation along highways and has initiated conversations with <b>Houston Independent School District</b> and <b>Aldine Independent School District</b>.</p> <p><i>See last page for contact information and meeting information</i></p>

#### Protect People Walking, Biking, and Rolling in Wheelchairs

**Concern 1.** Residents of the Independence Heights walk, ride bicycles, use wheelchairs, connect on buses, and move in cars. However, car-oriented infrastructure, such as I-45, often acts as a barrier to safe pedestrian, bicycle, and accessible mobility in the neighborhood. The I-45 expansion will make the highway wider, increasing the interaction between pedestrians and the highway, including people crossing beneath the highway to and from residences on one side and commercial locations on other; people walking to and from destinations and bus stops (e.g., METRO bus routes #23, #36 or #56) along the highway access road, where speeds will routinely exceed 40 or 50 mph.

**Concern 2.** Since 2010, a majority of the 21 pedestrian and bike crashes near Roosevelt Elementary School have occurred under or next to the freeway; children who attend Roosevelt and reside within its attendance zones cross beneath the highway. Additionally, the NHHIP will expand the width of I-45 and increase vehicle speeds, leading to greater danger for pedestrians and cyclists.

Potential Mitigation Strategies	Advocacy Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use no more than two lanes on the frontage roads and keep them narrower than 12' wide to calm traffic speed.</li> <li>Install pedestrian-oriented lighting; ladder style highly visible crosswalks; and accessible pedestrian signals appropriate to help the community safely cross.</li> <li>Provide wide walk/bike facilities (like those proposed for Segment 3 Downtown and within the Houston Bike Plan) with sidewalk width appropriate to accommodate persons using power wheelchairs.</li> <li>Include in the NHHIP green spaces and trees to replace open spaces and shade (formal and informal) places used by the community.</li> </ul>	<p>Houston-Galveston Area Council's <b>Director of Transportation Planning Alan Clark</b> influences regional mobility and safety planning. Local leaders, including <b>Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo</b> and <b>Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner</b>, direct their planners and engineers to coordinate with TxDOT on locations where the highway meets urban streets; <b>Judge Hidalgo</b> and <b>Mayor Turner</b> share significant influence about improving walk/bike access to opportunity. <b>Councilmember David Robinson</b> chairs City Council's Transportation, Technology, and Infrastructure Committee; he is also first vice chair of the Houston-Galveston Area Council's Transportation Policy Council, which directs how the region plans and improves transportation.</p> <p><i>See last page for contact information and meeting information</i></p>



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## KEY DECISIONMAKERS AND INFLUENCERS

Here is a list of local, regional, state, and federal leaders to contact. Use the information from the summary as talking points to frame your concerns.

### FEDERAL

**U.S. Representative, 18<sup>th</sup> District: Sheila Jackson-Lee**

Heights Office 713.861.4070 | <https://jacksonlee.house.gov/>

**U.S. Representative, 29<sup>th</sup> District: Sylvia Garcia**

Houston Office 832.325.3150 | <https://sylviagarcia.house.gov/>

**U.S. Representative, 7<sup>th</sup> District: Lizzie Fletcher**

Houston Office 713.353.8680 | <https://fletcher.house.gov/>

**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 6 (includes Texas):**

**Wren Stenger**, Director, Air & Radiation Division

214.665.7200 | [www.epa.gov/aboutepa/epa-region-6-south-central](http://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/epa-region-6-south-central)

### STATE

**Governor: Greg Abbott**

800.843.5789 | <https://gov.texas.gov/contact>

**State Senator, District 6: Carol Alvarado**

512.463.0106 | [carol.alvarado@senate.texas.gov](mailto:carol.alvarado@senate.texas.gov)

**State Senator, District 13: Borris Miles**

512.463.0113 | [borris.miles@senate.texas.gov](mailto:borris.miles@senate.texas.gov)

**State Representative, District 140: Armando Walle**

512.463.0924 | [armando.walle@house.texas.gov](mailto:armando.walle@house.texas.gov)

**State Representative, District 148: Jessica Cristina Farrar**

512.463.0620 | [jessica.farrar@house.texas.gov](mailto:jessica.farrar@house.texas.gov)

**Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Office of Air:**

**Tonya Baer**, Deputy Director

512.239.2104 | [www.tceq.texas.gov/agency/air\\_main.html](http://www.tceq.texas.gov/agency/air_main.html)

### TEXAS TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

**Texas Transportation Commission (TxDOT Governing Board)**

**J. Bruce Bugg**, Chairman: 512.305.9509

\***Laura Ryan**, Commissioner: 512.305.9509

\* *responsible for coordinating with TxDOT Houston District*

[www.txdot.gov/inside-txdot/administration/commission.html](http://www.txdot.gov/inside-txdot/administration/commission.html)

### TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

**TxDOT Statewide Executive**

**James Bass**, Executive Director: 512.305.9501

**TxDOT Houston District**

**Quincy Allen**, District Engineer: 713.802.5000

Project website: [www.ih45northandmore.com](http://www.ih45northandmore.com)

Email comments to: [HOU-PIOWebmail@txdot.gov](mailto:HOU-PIOWebmail@txdot.gov)

### CITY OF HOUSTON

**Houston Mayor**

**Sylvester Turner**: 713.837.0311 | [mayor@houstontx.gov](mailto:mayor@houstontx.gov)

**District H City Council Member**

**Karla Cisneros**: 832.393.3003 | [districth@houstontx.gov](mailto:districth@houstontx.gov)

City Hall Annex, 900 Bagby, First Floor, Houston, 77002

**At-Large City Council Members**

**Mike Knox**: 832.393.3014 | [atlarge1@houstontx.gov](mailto:atlarge1@houstontx.gov)

**David Robinson**: 832.393.3013 | [atlarge2@houstontx.gov](mailto:atlarge2@houstontx.gov)

**Michael Kubosh**: 832.393.3005 | [atlarge3@houstontx.gov](mailto:atlarge3@houstontx.gov)

**Amanda Edwards**: 832.393.3012 | [atlarge4@houstontx.gov](mailto:atlarge4@houstontx.gov)

**Jack Christie**: 832.393.3017 | [atlarge5@houstontx.gov](mailto:atlarge5@houstontx.gov)

### HARRIS COUNTY

**Harris County Judge**

**Lina Hidalgo**, County Judge: 713.274.7000

**Harris County Historical Commission**

**Janet K. Wagner**, Commission Chair: [HistoricalCommissionChair@hctx.net](mailto:HistoricalCommissionChair@hctx.net)

**Christopher 'Chris' Varela**, Commission Vice-Chair: [HistoricalCommissionVice-Chair@hctx.net](mailto:HistoricalCommissionVice-Chair@hctx.net)

[Chair@hctx.net](mailto:Chair@hctx.net)

\***Debra Blackcock-Sloan**, Commission Member: 713.659.9586 |

[HistoricalCommissionMarkers@hctx.net](mailto:HistoricalCommissionMarkers@hctx.net)

\* *responsible for marker dedications*

Commission website: <http://historicalcommission.harriscountytx.gov>

**Harris County Commissioners' Court**

**Rodney Ellis**, Precinct 1: 713.274.1000

### OTHER

**Houston-Galveston Area Council**, Alan Clark, Director of Transportation Planning: [alan.clark@h-gac.com](mailto:alan.clark@h-gac.com) | [PublicComments@h-gac.com](http://PublicComments@h-gac.com)

**Greater Houston Partnership**: 713.844.3600 | [gph@houston.org](mailto:gph@houston.org)

**Kinder Foundation**: 2229 San Felipe, Suite 1700, Houston, TX 77019 | [www.facebook.com/KinderFoundation/](http://www.facebook.com/KinderFoundation/)

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## IMPORTANT REGULARLY SCHEDULED MEETINGS

The following are some of the key meetings held routinely during which public comments regarding transportation are welcome.

**Texas Transportation Commission: Meeting** (Monthly, typically on the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday | 9:00 AM)

125 East 11th St, Austin, TX 78701. *Sign up to speak: 512.305.9509; [www.txdot.gov/contact-us/form.html?id=transcom-email](http://www.txdot.gov/contact-us/form.html?id=transcom-email)*

**Houston-Galveston Area Council: Transportation Policy Council** (Monthly, typically on the 4<sup>th</sup> Friday | 9:30 AM)

TxDOT Houston District Auditorium, 7600 Washington Ave, Houston, TX 77002. *Schedule: [www.h-gac.com/transportation-policy-council/](http://www.h-gac.com/transportation-policy-council/)*

**Houston City Council: Public Comment Session** (Every Tuesday 1:30 PM; Schedule: [www.houstontx.gov/citysec/calendar.pdf](http://www.houstontx.gov/citysec/calendar.pdf))

2nd floor of City Hall, 901 Bagby, Houston, TX 77002. *Sign up to speak: 832.393.1100, [citysecretary@houstontx.gov](mailto:citysecretary@houstontx.gov), or by coming by the office on the public level of the City Hall Annex by 1:30 p.m. that Tuesday.*

**City Council: Transportation, Technology, and Infrastructure Committee Meeting** (Typically monthly on varying dates | Thursdays at 10:00 AM)

City Hall Council Chambers, 901 Bagby, Houston 77002. *Email [Julia.Retta@houstontx.gov](mailto:Julia.Retta@houstontx.gov) to be added to email list.*

**Harris County: Commissioners Court** (One or more times per month | 10:00 AM; Schedule: <https://agenda.harriscountytx.gov/>)

1001 Preston Street, Suite 934, Houston, TX 77002. *Request an appearance: <https://appearancerequest.harriscountytx.gov/>.*

**Super Neighborhood #51: Meeting** (Every 4th Thursday at 6:00 PM)

2101 South St., Houston, TX 77009. *Email [Jack.valinski@houstontx.gov](mailto:Jack.valinski@houstontx.gov) to be added to email list.*

*METRO Meetings?*