

EQUITY in TRANSIT 2026 at a glance

What a decade of I-45 construction could mean for transit riders



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TxDOT's I-45 Project will close dozens of streets through 2042. Transit riders will bear the brunt of this disruption.

The I-45 Expansion Project, officially known as the *North Houston Highway Improvement Project* or *NHHIP*, began construction in 2023. Led by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), the project will widen and realign sections of I-45 and five other Houston freeways, starting first in the communities in and around Downtown, and later along I-45 north to Beltway 8.



In all, the I-45 Project will impact:

- 61 local street crossings
- 65 METRO bus and rail routes – over half of METRO's network, serving over 200,000 daily transit trips.

It's going to be a lot harder to get around Houston for the next decade or more – especially for transit riders.

Without action, transit will suffer. But with smart decisions, transit can be the solution.

Equity in Transit 2026 takes a closer look at the impact of the I-45 Expansion Project on riders – and identifies ways for transit to be part of the solution for everyone. We surveyed over 500 Houstonians to learn their feelings about the projects, how they cope with delays, and the transportation improvements they'd like to see.



LINK Houston surveyed over 500 Houstonians at transit centers, on-board buses, and online

Over 15,000 daily transit trips are already being impacted.

As of September 2026, over a dozen METRO bus routes are running on detours as a result of I-45 construction. These detours add time and variability to every trip, causing riders to spend more time getting where they're going or wondering when the bus will show up.

For example, routes **40 Telephone / Heights** and **41 Kirby / Polk** are running on a permanent detour as a result of the closure of Polk Street. This detour adds over a half mile of distance and 4 minutes of travel time to all trips.



The closure of Polk Street (in Red) has forced METRO routes 40 and 41 to run on a longer detour (in orange)



I have been late to class and work more times than I'd like considering I always take the early bus. I understand that I am relying on public transit and try to account for that, but sometimes the wait is excessive.
-Paloma, transit rider

This is just the beginning. 65 routes, serving almost 200,000 daily transit trips, will be impacted within the next 10 years.

Transit riders are bearing the brunt of construction.

- Changes to a scheduled bus/train route compound into highly variable losses of time. One missed transfer can set a rider back over an hour.
- These delays can cause employees to be late for work, students to be late for school, or miss medical appointments.
- When asked how they cope with delays, 4 in 10 riders say they have no other choice than to call a rideshare like Uber or Lyft – an expensive option.

When transit becomes burdensome, everyone suffers from more cars on the road. METRO, TxDOT, the City, and County must work together to provide relief to riders.

So, what can be done?

1: Move Riders Faster Through Traffic

METRO can help move riders faster through areas impacted by construction by running more express service that can bypass congested areas. METRO already does this well with certain local bus routes (route #s starting with 100) and Park and Ride routes (route #s starting with 200). **These routes should run all day at consistent frequencies**, like they did during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.



In June and July 2026, METRO ran eight additional express routes every 30 minutes, 7 days a week

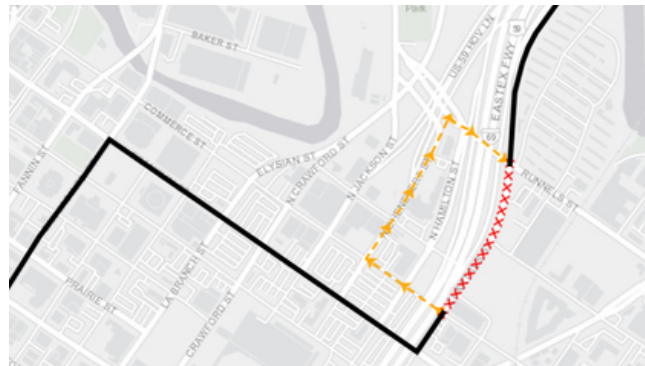
Agencies that manage streets, like the City of Houston, have a role to play, too. Bus lanes, transit signal priority, and other improvements can help buses move faster through traffic.

2: Make Detours Faster and More Direct

Currently, when street closures force METRO to detour their bus routes, METRO tries to preserve service to as many existing stops as possible. **While well-intentioned, these new routes are often roundabout and indirect, increasing travel time for riders** who are already on the bus or catching it farther along the line.

For example, route 137 Northshore Express is currently running on a circuitous detour Downtown that adds up to 6 minutes to all trips, just to serve one existing stop. By designing detours that are more direct, METRO can save time for all riders.

Riders we surveyed are open to changes to bus routes that are more efficient and faster for everyone. **METRO should develop a clear policy on detours** to provide the best possible outcome, starting with **meaningful engagement with riders**.



The current detour for route 137 adds up to six minutes to trips



This time could be saved with a more direct detour

3: Leave No Riders Behind

More direct detour routes will mean that some riders will need to walk or roll farther to a new stop. And regardless, the countless street closures the I-45 project will cause means that some stops will close anyways. These riders will now need to find new ways to access the METRO system – whether by walking or rolling to a new stop or by receiving access to a new route or microtransit service. **METRO should take an all of the above approach** to ensure riders have the options they need.



Many sidewalks in the project area are unpassable, such as this one on Hutchins Street in East Downtown

Walking or rolling to a new stop – even for a few hundred feet – can be treacherous in Houston where sidewalks are often poor or missing and high-speed roadways feel impossible to cross. Riders we surveyed asked for safer intersections, better sidewalks, more trees, and other improvements. **TxDOT, METRO, and the City of Houston should ensure all walking and rolling routes affected by I-45 construction are brought up to these standards.**

Still, not everyone is able to walk or roll to a new stop, particularly people with limited mobility. On-demand microtransit response services can help bridge the gap while fixed route service is disrupted. **This can mean expedited METROLift eligibility for riders, new curb2curb zones, or accessible Community Connector vehicles with extended zones.**



Microtransit incorporates the use of smaller vans like the curb2curb pictured above.

4: Improve Communications About Disruptions

Even with the best efforts and preparation, the I-45 Project will present uncertainty to transit service. Between traffic, detours, and other unforeseen challenges, buses will inevitably be late or disrupted.

Unfortunately, too many riders are not hearing about potential disruptions in advance. Most riders we spoke with indicated they did not hear about disruptions until they got to the stop.

METRO should increase its communication about disruptions across more platforms and make them easier to understand.



Most riders surveyed said they don't learn about detours until they get to the stop.