

TPC Comments May 20,2022

Comment 1:

LINK Houston Director of Policy & Planning's Remarks RE: NHHIP Houston-Galveston Area Council: Transportation Policy Council

May 20th, 2022

Good morning TPC members and the public.

I am Jonathan Brooks with LINK Houston. I am a voting member for citizens interests on the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) and am part of the slate for the new Regional Transportation Safety Task Force. I am here today to add my remarks about the NHHIP to those you already heard from Ms. Ines Sigel, our executive.

We continue to believe a better NHHIP project is possible – and essential. Local officials, led by Mayor Turner, provided a feasible alternative vision in 2020. The vision was the result of extensive, iterative, and open-minded community engagement. TxDOT refused to study the outcome. As you know, TPC attempted to negotiate an MOU to foster a collaborative process.

LINK Houston continues to believe in the fundamental aspects of Mayor Turner's vision, and that an altered NHHIP would result in similar types, and levels, of benefits as TxDOT's own plan – a facility and corridor that is more safe, multimodal, reliable, available for evacuations, and resilient to flooding.

Houston deserves a project that makes the 10 or so years of construction pain and \$9+ billion investment worth it – for everyone and every business – and that does not re-harm communities of color. It may be that the ongoing U.S. DOT Civil Rights investigation or Harris County lawsuit will force change. Far better for TxDOT, TPC, and partners to show leadership. I end my remarks by recommending each of you consider Oni Blair's comments on racial justice and the NHHIP, given as a TAC member in June 2020 – see below.

Thank you for your time.

-- Begin Quote of June 17th, 2020, Remarks by LINK Houston Executive Director Oni Blair to H-GAC TAC (which had an agenda item including a vote on a portion of NHHIP funding) --

My name is Oni Blair, and I am a voting member of the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC).

I thank the parties – the City of Houston, Harris County, Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO), Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), and Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) – for their continued engagement in the North Houston Highway Improvement Project (or NHHIP).

As you all know, the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) that we'll vote on today includes NHHIP's Segment 3. This segment stretches from Downtown Houston to IH-10. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) estimated that NHHIP segment 3 would displace about 900 housing units, meaning thousands of people in predominantly Black and Brown communities.

America is grappling with racial tensions and the real impacts of systemic racism. Every person on the TAC must understand that a vote on this project continues those very systems of oppression, disparity, and racial inequities. TxDOT estimates Segment 3 is 67% minority and that Segments 2 and 1 have minority populations in the 80 and 90 percentiles, respectively.

Overall, the December 2019 Draft Community Impacts Assessment technical report (an appendix to the EIS) still estimates that the project will displace over 1,000 homes. These homes are primarily in communities of color, where the NHHIP will have an outsized effect on the health, community stability, culture, economics, and general well-being of many of Houston's historic African-American and Latinx neighborhoods. The disparate racial impact of the pending action compounds the widely acknowledged injustice that TxDOT inflicted upon Houston African-American neighborhoods when TxDOT first constructed the interstate highway system 50 years ago.

I have been a part of the TAC for over one year. I am sure some people on this body are asking, "What does that have to do with me?" Or asking, "Isn't this the cost of progress?" Some of you have said, if we just showed the public that we have to expand the highway to meet safety standards, then the public will understand we have to expand the footprint of the highway and accept all of the consequences that come with it. Some of you understand quite well the consequences but are afraid to speak up in front of your peers and especially in front of TxDOT.

To me, these are not acceptable answers or positions. We know the consequences of this project will predominantly impact Black people and Latinx people. We know that those consequences can be devastating to a community. The people living alongside the highway deserve to be safe and have access to opportunity; not to bear the brunt of this project for another 50 years. Each of us around this table has a responsibility to do what's right for people, regardless of their skin color. Standing idly by while allowing this funding to go forward without real community-supported improvements to the project makes every member complicit in this injustice and a co-conspirator in continued systemic racism.

Today, I am asking the TAC members to be mindful of your vote. Would you vote this way if you lived in the footprint of this highway? Would you support funding if those were your neighbors and families? I am asking the TAC to demand a real statement or resolution that delineates an agreement between the major parties to specifically study and pursue the alternatives outlined by Mayor Turner in his letter to Commissioner Ryan. I am asking the TAC and Transportation Policy Council (TPC) to specifically address the outstanding adverse impacts outlined in that document, especially the displacement of people and businesses. And I am asking that the statement, resolution, or MOU – whatever form it takes – delineate specific expectations linked to TAC/TPC decisions to halt or withdraw funding should the project fail to address the very real concerns of residents – taxpayers – who live adjacent to the project.

It is imperative that we take action to address the real concerns that numerous stakeholders have identified concerning the inequitable consequences of the NHHIP on Black and Latinx communities. We cannot sit here and pretend that the decisions of this body are unrelated to the discussions concerning systemic racism that are going on in Houston and across the country. I am asking my fellow TAC members to communicate with their TPC counterparts and agree to create real commitments to improve the NHHIP project or to halt the project until it can satisfactorily address those concerns.

Comment 2:

Air Alliance

Chair Robinson and Members of the Transportation Policy Council,
In July 2019, over 100 residents and advocates flooded the TPC meeting space and delivered over 6 hours of public comments urging the Council to withdraw support for the North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) and work with TxDOT to design a project that would serve Houston communities, not rip them apart. In the time since that July meeting, the case against the NHHIP has only grown stronger and the opposition more numerous, while the supposed benefits of the project – not to be realized for another decade at least – have become more doubtful.

The following collection of articles and report excerpts published within the last two years demonstrate how wasteful this nearly \$10 billion project could be and depicts just how backwards our region looks for continuing to double down on outdated transportation planning practices. This single project has attracted national and international attention for its documented civil rights violations, further destruction of Houston communities already divided by past highways, and obstinate commitment to solving congestion despite a damning list of failed antecedents. Given the mounting negative attention and widespread criticism, one would hope a transportation planning body such as the TPC would reevaluate its support of the project and feel comfortable questioning TxDOT about the soundness of the single largest highway investment in this state's history.

Our hope in distributing these articles is that members of this body feel empowered to ask: is this truly the most effective use of an unprecedented infrastructure investment? Does this project really meet the needs of the region? Can we achieve our shared goals another way?

Comment 3:

May 20, 2022

H-GAC TPC Meeting - Public Comments
Ines Sigel, Interim Executive Director
LINK Houston

Good morning, my name is Ines Sigel, and I am with LINK Houston. We advocate for a robust and equitable transportation network so that all people can reach opportunity. We envision a

Houston region where it is possible to be a first-class resident and move around without the need to own a car. I am here today with our partners and concerned residents to urge you rethink the NHHIP.

Houstonians, particularly people who live and work along the project corridor – and who face displacement from their homes and jobs and disconnection from the people and neighborhood in which they have built relationships and identity – deserve a more equitable and sustainable multi-modal project that sets up everyone in our region for economic success and improved quality of life. The NHHIP as currently designed wastes billions of taxpayer dollars – more than \$9.5 billion as presently estimated. The project does not align with the Houston Climate Action Plan, which calls for significantly reducing vehicle miles travelled, the Resilient Houston Strategy, the Houston Bike Plan, Vision Zero, or METRONext. In fact, the NHHIP will cause substantial disruptions to public transit in Houston and greatly increase the cost of METRONext projects that 68% of voters supported. The impacted communities deserve to be at the center of who the NHHIP benefits. It is time for TPC members to push for a truly transformational, multi-modal project and not continue business as usual. Houston is a modern city and needs modern solutions. Modern solutions do not include continuing to marginalize communities of color to induce more congestion. TPC members, you have an opportunity to truly lead and demonstrate to the people of Houston, the region, the state of Texas, and the rest of the country, that Texans can indeed develop innovative solutions and do a better job of bringing everyone along.

Thank you for your time.