

**6. ENDORSEMENT OF A LETTER FROM THE TPC CHAIR RELATING TO THE
NORTH HOUSTON HIGHWAY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (NHHIP)**

Background

The North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) was initiated to update the I-45 North Corridor from Beltway 8 North to and around Downtown Houston and enhance safety and travel for residents, businesses, and visitors to the Houston-Galveston region. The Transportation Policy Council has continuously included the NHHIP in the Regional Transportation Plan since 2005 as a project of regional significance and an important element of the region's transportation future. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) issued a Record of Decision (ROD) for the NHHIP on February 4, 2021. In early March 2021, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) requested that TxDOT "pause" work on the NHHIP while that agency conducts an investigation of Title VI complaints related to the project.

At its March 26, 2021 meeting, the Transportation Policy Council passed Resolution 2021-01, which expressed support for the North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) and TxDOT's commitment to address community concerns about the project's potential impacts.

Current Situation

After a clarification in June 2021 of FHWA's request, the NHHIP remains paused. Following a public comment period by TxDOT during the summer of 2021 to consider whether or not to continue funding the NHHIP, the Texas Transportation Commission (TTC) included the NHHIP in the 2022 TxDOT Unified Transportation Plan, adopted in August 2021. The Chairman of the TTC stated at that meeting that if the pause was not lifted by the end of November, the Commission may consider removing funding for the project so that state funds can be directed to projects that are more likely to advance without delays. As of this agenda posting, the FHWA Title VI investigation is continuing.

Staff and the TPC Chair have prepared a letter to the Transportation Commission requesting that funding for the project be continued and committing the MPO to work with all stakeholders to follow a cooperative process to complete the NHHIP and address concerns about its design and impact.

Action Requested

That the Transportation Policy Council endorse the proposed letter from the TPC Chair to the Texas Transportation Commission.



Transportation Policy Council

For the Houston-Galveston Transportation Management Area

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November 19, 2021

J. Bruce Bugg, Jr.
Chairman
Texas Transportation Commission
125 E. 11th Street
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Chairman Bugg and Members of the Transportation Commission,

As the Chair of the Houston-Galveston Area Council's Transportation Policy Council (TPC) I am writing to express our continued resolve to work with TxDOT and other stakeholders to complete the North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP) and provide the benefits from this project for Texas, our region, and our residents. In our role as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for this region, the TPC has consistently deliberated how to refine the NHHIP to maintain support and ensure the best possible project. We have done so by funding and participating in planning efforts, partnering with TxDOT to provide nearly \$500 million of Category 2 funding for the project, and including the project in the Regional Transportation Plan.

The need for improvements to the I-45 corridor in this area is well established. For example, just one portion of the project – Segment 3, primarily in the downtown Houston area – would:

- address the state's 5th, 7th, 10th, and 11th most congested corridors,
- improve hurricane evacuation options for a large part of the Houston-Galveston region's Gulf Coast,
- update aging infrastructure largely unchanged since original construction of the facility,
- reduce impacts from severe weather and flooding, and
- remove numerous safety issues that make this stretch of I-45 one of the nation's most dangerous highways.

The TPC passed a resolution in March establishing a desire to see the NHHIP completed and expressing support for TxDOT's continued collaboration with local partners to address community concerns about the project. I ask that the Commission continue funding for the NHHIP and make all efforts to see the various projects that make up the overall NHHIP completed as soon as possible. Our region and the state need the improvements to the critical I-45 corridor.

The alternative of removing funding for these I-45 improvements and cancelling these projects provides only undesirable transportation outcomes. The safety, traffic delay, and aging infrastructure problems would continue to generate hundreds of millions of dollars of loss every year. One major storm event could bring untold loss, suffering, and damages. When

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improvements to I-45 in this area are eventually re-established, the planning and design process alone would probably add years. In the long run it would be less expensive to taxpayers to address the challenges of this project now, rather than cancel it and delay these improvements until years beyond when they are currently planning.

Although obstacles to advancing this project have arisen, the MPO asserts that these can be overcome; rather than being viewed as reasons to stop the project, these challenges should be thought of as opportunities for additional and dedicated collaboration between all the parties with an interest in this corridor. Our MPO is committed to working with all regional stakeholders – including TxDOT, local governments, USDOT, and the community – to find a way to reestablish and follow a cooperative process to complete this project and address concerns about the design and impact. We are willing to convene discussions to achieve this goal.

As the discussions regarding the path forward for the NHHIP, the Transportation Policy Council asserts that our region's transportation needs are significant and extend beyond the I-45 corridor. If the undesirable and unpreferred outcome of removing funding for the NHHIP occurs, the Transportation Policy Council will identify and prioritize projects in our region to be the state's next priorities for addressing the safety, traffic, and emergency evacuation needs and seek to work with TxDOT and the Transportation Commission to accelerate funding for those projects.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Clark
Chairman

Cc: The Honorable Alvin New
The Honorable Laura Ryan
The Honorable Robert C. Vaughn
Mr. Marc Williams, TxDOT Executive Director