

Project to ease Hwy. 290 traffic

Story Highlights

- Texas Department of Transportation plans multi-modal Hwy. 290 corridor
- Hwy. 290 congestion expected to jump to 12 hours daily without capacity construction
- Program plans to break ground in 2012
- Plans include the construction of Hempstead Tollway by the Harris County Toll Road Authority

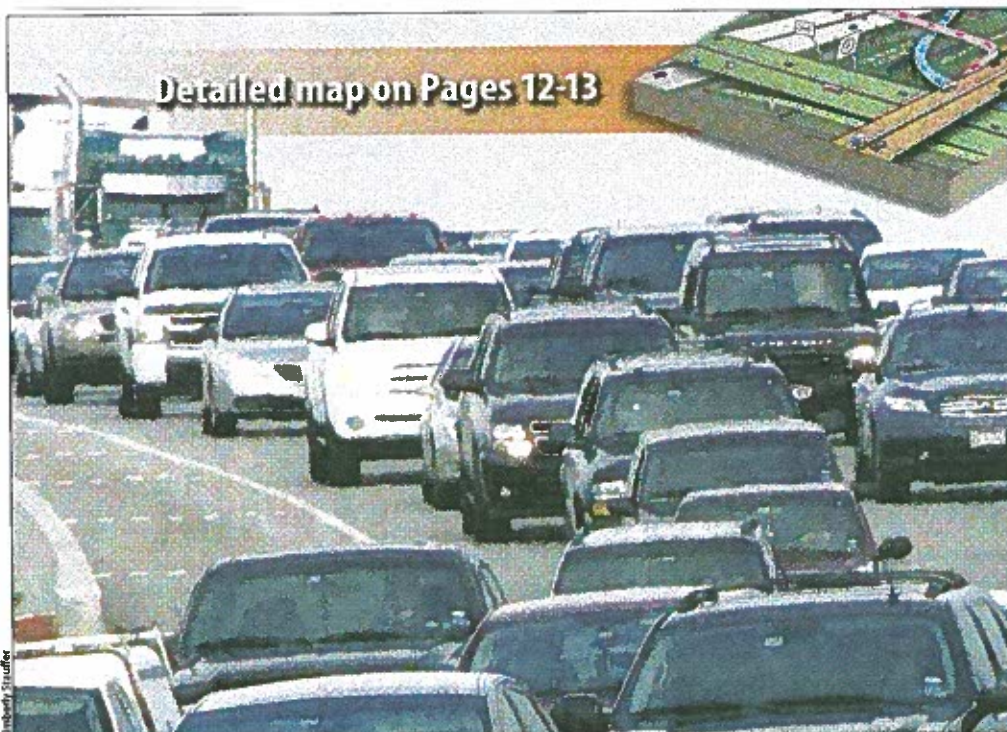
By Kimberly Stauffer

An extensive construction plan to renovate the Hwy. 290 corridor will alleviate gridlock plaguing the rapidly expanding northwest Houston community and allow for future metropolitan growth.

The Texas Department of Transportation project, divided into three phases and slated for completion in 2024, will widen and reconstruct the 38-mile Hwy. 290 and build Hempstead Tollway, a parallel thoroughfare, which will connect to IH 610 in a three-way interchange.

Another component is a passenger rail line planned to run alongside Union Pacific Railroad's Eureka Subdivision freight line, adding a mass-transit option for northwest Houston residents. The rail line flanks the proposed Hempstead Tollway. The project plans are not definite until approved by the Federal Highway Administration.

Steve Hrcir, program manager for the Hwy. 290 program, said TxDOT strives to



Detailed map on Pages 12-13

Hwy. 290 traffic comes to a standstill during morning rush hour.

quickly identify congested areas before they become major traffic issues.

"Transportation is always reactionary. We'll never be able to make improvements ahead of demands," he said. "We monitor it and then try to tackle the biggest problem we have."

Program plans

Phase one is expected to break ground in 2012. It will include reconstruction of Hwy. 290 from IH 610 to West 34th Street and the IH 610 and Hwy. 290 interchange. Also part of the first phase is Hempstead Tollway's Managed Lanes design and construction, which is the primary responsibility of the Harris

County Toll Road Authority. The tollway inherits Hwy. 290's Metro HOV lane and will be four lanes. Two-lane frontage roads will continue from IH 610 to the Beltway. Officials anticipate completing phase one in 2015.

Phase two of the project will involve the reconstruction and widening of Hwy. 290 from West 34th Street to Telge Road into five lanes running each direction from the interchange to Hwy. 6 and then tapering to four lanes. It also provides for direct access between the highway and tollway, which will eventually

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A category "tree" storm

As a result of Hurricane Ike, Centerpoint Energy substations, including these in northwest Houston, experienced outages due to fallen trees. The map illustrates how the number and location of trees affected power restoration.

- Barker Substation
- Tomball Substation

- Barker Substation: 34,554 customers
 - Area is compact with few trees.
 - Less than 20 poles were down, with most street accessible.
 - A single crew of 40 workers were able to complete major restoration work in one day.

- Tomball Substation: 17,159 customers
 - Area is large and spread out with many tall pine trees outside of easements.
 - Hundreds of poles were down.
 - It took 10 crews of 450 workers to complete all major restoration work in seven days.

Source: Centerpoint Energy

Community officials outline improved disaster plan

Fallen trees contribute to area-wide blackouts

By Kimberly Stauffer

More than a year after Hurricane Ike devastated the Houston area, local officials continue to analyze their disaster efforts and prepare for the next major storm, even as they carry out residual repairs.

The category 2 hurricane ripped sheets of metal off skyscrapers and dumped almost 19 inches of rain in areas north of Houston. Thousands of fallen trees exacerbated transportation issues as limbs and foliage clogged neighborhood streets and major roadways, and were a

contributor to the largest blackout in Texas history.

With much of the city in the dark, communication through newscasts, internet or even phone was impossible. Francisco Sanchez, public information officer for the Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management, said with 92 percent of the community without power, the agency struggled to create enough Points of Distribution, decide where to place them and how to inform residents.

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Hwy. 290

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dead end at the proposed Grand Parkway. This phase of the project will not begin until the Hempstead Tollway is operational to avoid working on both major roadways at once.

The third phase will widen the highway spanning from the Grand Parkway to FM 2920.

The high-capacity, mass-transit corridor, or passenger rail line, is still under investigation. The Gulf Coast Freight Rail District is negotiating consultant contracts for preliminary engineering to gauge the capital costs of operating a commuter rail. If built, the rail could eventually connect to Houston Metro's system, providing greater connectivity between downtown and the city's northwest region.

An approximately 9.2-mile bike trail will be built alongside the Hempstead Tollway frontage road during the first phase of construction on the inbound side and will connect to the Houston bike trail system near Post Oak Boulevard. It will end near the FM 529 area.

The \$4.6 billion estimated total cost includes purchase of right-of-way property, construction, administrative and engineering expenses, and utility adjustment costs. Using a combination of federal, local and toll road funding, the project also incorpo-

Hempstead Tollway and the passenger rail—dispersing traffic at the congested IH 610 junction. The Hwy. 290 HOV lane will disappear, and the existing concrete will merge with the project's new main lanes. The program also includes several short-term projects expected to begin later this year to alleviate crowding at intersections and allow easier movement when entering and exiting the highway.

The Hwy. 290 corridor population is estimated to surge 64 percent between 2006 and 2035, increasing from 543,000 to 888,000, according to TxDOT.

"If we do nothing, the models show the problem growing to 12 hours of congested traffic," Hrnrcir said.

Area impact

Officials began considering this overall construction a decade ago. The project's major investment study began in 1999, and the state agency remains mired in paperwork, pushing back the release date of the Final Environmental Impact Statement as it updates traffic counts and air and noise quality reports to the Federal Highway Administration, which has final approval over the project. The FEIS considers the social, economic and environmental impacts of a project on an area.

Once approved, the document must then be released for public comment, extending the timeline at least another 60 days, and all comments must be answered. TxDOT will notify residents through its website,

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— Steve Hrnrcir
Hwy. 290 program, program manager



rates the acquisition of 50 feet of right-of-way for the proposed rail line.

Hrnrcir said the main goal of the project is to create a traffic corridor capable of handling the estimated 250,000 cars driving Hwy. 290 daily. Most corridors, such as I-10 at IH 610 and Hwy. 59, have estimated traffic numbers between 250,000 and 300,000, but Hwy. 290 lacks improvements made to other freeways.

"Generally speaking, our goal is to eliminate stop-and-go traffic," Hrnrcir said. "We want to reduce [traffic] to less than a couple of hours."

The construction will establish several commuting options—Hwy. 290, the

area publications and an extensive e-mail list.

"We're trying to get as cohesive a document as possible," said Anikka Ayala-Rogers, Hwy. 290 public information officer, Houston District. "We strive to do our due diligence for the public."

The agency plans to request a Record of Decision from the Federal Highway Administration in 2010 after the FEIS is approved, said Mike Zientek, senior public involvement representative for the Hwy. 290 program. A Record of Decision is the final endorsement of the project from the federal agency, supporting it as the best possible proposal.

Hwy. 290 commuters left in gridlock

While most Houston highways have undergone massive capacity reconstructions in the last 40 years, Hwy. 290, one of the busiest corridors in the city, has not had any major work since the 1960s. The graph below illustrates the small daily traffic count margin among the city's major thoroughfares at the IH 610 intersection, highlighting Hwy. 290's almost equal status.



Funds

Even with stamped approval, the project lacks a necessary component: funding. While the 2012 start date has more to do with the time needed to purchase right-of-way property, the extended timeline is all about money. A six-year federal transportation bill ends this year and while drafting of a new bill will begin in September, Hrnrcir said it could take up to 18 months to approve, forcing the Hwy. 290 project to hold off on major construction.

"The Highway Trust Fund is not keeping up. In the last fiscal year, \$42 billion was spent nationally," Hrnrcir said. "We can't plan to spend money that's not there."

The Federal Highway Trust Fund, created in 1956, is the nation's Interstate Highway System's bank account, funded by taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel. The fund has faced billion-dollar shortfalls in the past several years with Congress trying to fill the monetary gaps.

While waiting on the government funding, Ayala-Rogers said the project's phase one design plans, which include the interchange and direct connectors between IH 610, Hempstead Tollway and Hwy. 290, are almost half finished.

"We're further along in the design process, which is really important for the

future when funding is available," she said. "The last thing we want is to have funding and no design."

Design plans include right-of-way schematics, an element many residents worry will force eviction from their property. Hrnrcir said right-of-way impact would be mostly on grass areas and parking lots along Hwy. 290. According to the unapproved project plans, a row of businesses at Old Katy Road, Hempstead Road and IH 610 may be impacted, along with a residential complex at Antoine Drive and 43rd Street. The impact could be minimal, such as a few parking spots and landscaping, or require a larger part of the property.

The largest impact will be to businesses along Hempstead Highway because the road must be completely reconstructed, Hrnrcir said. The end result will be an expanded corridor capable of conducting an increasing amount of traffic.

"I'm not an engineer, but I see them always trying to refine the system—there's a science to moving folks," Zientek said. "We're trying to give people as many options as possible to make a move as safely as possible."

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Detailed map of Hwy. 290 project on next page

Driving Hwy. 290 through the years

Source: Texas Department of Transportation

Since its construction in the 1960s, Hwy. 290 traffic has expanded from a two-lane road into a busy corridor running the length of the rapidly growing Cy-Fair community. Its daily traffic has followed suit, multiplying each decade by the tens of thousands. The graphic below depicts the daily traffic count at the Hwy. 290 and IH 610 intersection through the years.

