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### Work on 290 to start by next summer

[Print Page](#)**By JENNIFER COGAN**

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The US 290 improvement and expansion project is a complicated issue with several moving parts, but ultimately, years of work will serve as a benefit to Northwest Houston residents.

"In terms of the program itself," said Anikka Rogers , public information officer for the Texas Department of Transportation "the partnership exists between multiple agencies, including TxDOT and the Harris County Toll Road Authority and the Gulf Coast Rail District."

Understanding the part each agency plays in the project is easier when it's broken down by part instead of looking at the project as a whole.

#### **TxDOT**

TxDOT's responsibility, said Rogers , is securing environmental clearance for the entire 38 miles of the footprint of the project, which includes improvements to US 290, improvements to the Hempstead highway and reserving 50 feet of right-of-way for high capacity transit.

"Our job," said Rogers , "is to get the overall approval for the environmental process."

The project begins at the US 290 and 610 interchange and extends all the way out to the Harris County line. They will also be responsible for improvements and US 290 and Beltway 8, F.M. 1960 and Highway 6 at the US 290 overpass and expanding lanes on US 290 out to F.M. 2920.

"We will also add continuous frontage roads and make improvements to draining according to need," said Rogers .

The improvement that will likely make the most impact on NW Houston residents are the plans for the 610/US 290 interchange.

"People that are coming in on 290 have to make a decision where to go, so traffic weaves as they make their decision. The plan in place is to build ramps that take motorists directly where they need to go. This will cut down on weaving in and out and it will save people travel time," said Rogers .

Funding, however, has only been identified for half of the project. Proposition 12, approved by voters in 2007, will provide for inbound improvements. The agency is currently looking for sources of funding to cover outbound improvements.

TxDOT is currently awaiting environmental clearance to move forward with the improvements to the inbound interchange.

"If we don't start construction by the summer of 2011," Rogers said, "we lose the funding."

#### **Gulf Coast Rail Authority**

Recently established, the Gulf Coast Rail Authority looks to improve the existing freight rail structure and by achieving this, open up lines for high capacity passenger trains in the area. This is one of the options the GCRA is looking into for the 50 feet of right-of-way that is to be procured by TxDOT.

"The initial thinking," said Maureen Crocker, interim president of GCRA, "was that the right of way could be a Metro light rail that ran adjacent to the highway."

Since then, she said Union Pacific has identified a line that runs along the frontage road of US 290 that sees very light freight traffic and the company said they would consider selling it to be used for passenger trains.

"A study is underway to look at two things," said Crocker. "The physical condition of the track and what might need to be done in order to run a passenger train from 610 to Hempstead, and what is the ridership in the corridor. Is it feasible?"

Crocker said that once the feasibility is assessed, the next step is finding funding.

"We fully expect it to be feasible," she said, "so then the question is, 'how do you pay for it?'"

The rail authority does not have a dedicated source of funding, and Crocker said that a key component could lie in the next legislative session, beginning in January.

"This is an opportunity for this region to say 'look, you really need to give us the tools to locally fund this project'," Crocker said. "It's very important for the public to know what's going on and to tell their representatives that they want this passenger train if we are going to fund it."

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