



Thursday, May 20, 2004

The draft 2025 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) created by the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) is the largest, long-term transportation plan for the Houston area. The plan is available at www.2025plan.org. To help increase understanding of the plan the Gulf Coast Institute will publish a series of educational bulletins. For other transportation bulletins about the RTP, visit www.livablehouston.org

A New, "Express" Transportation System

A new Express Streets system, or "super arterials," makes up a large part of the draft RTP 2025. Express Streets are roadways somewhat in between city streets and highways in terms of speed and number of vehicles. Current examples include Allen Parkway and Memorial Drive. The proposed changes would involve reconstructing parts of streets such as Westheimer, Bellaire, N. Shepherd, and Kirby to allow more cars at faster speeds in effort to help defray increasing congestion on the highways. Express Streets would require road expansion in some areas, improved traffic signalization, and some grade separation (roads elevated or lowered).¹

A Significant Force

H-GAC's proposed Express Streets system makes up a significant part of the RTP - about \$8 billion worth of projects, which is 60 percent more than the cost of all the added capacity rail and bus projects. About half of those Express Street projects also involve road widening or new road construction. The Express Streets would also be a significant force in the built community. H-GAC has said that the Express Street plan would serve as a "fill-in" between freeways, spaced as close as 2.5 miles apart in urban areas.²

The Smart Growth Question

H-GAC transportation director Alan Clark has described the Express Street system as a "smart growth" tool for the City of Houston.³ H-GAC has said that staff is examining the compatibility of the express street concept with the Metro Signature Bus Service express concept. They are also talking about placing landscaping and bike and pedestrian facilities around the streets. The expenditures for these and other amenities described in the RTP, however, have not been explicitly included in the current plan, though staff has said that the Express Streets' cost estimation does include a 25% contingency which might allow for these expenditures.

What are Smart Streets?

Some of the projects listed in the RTP include Smart Streets. While Smart Streets are never defined in the RTP or adjoining appendices, H-GAC has said they are basically a subset of Express Streets that lack grade-separation.

Where would the Express Streets be?

The vast majority, 82 percent, of the Express Street centerline miles are outside of Beltway 8. Four percent are inside Loop 610 and

Express street share of added capacity

Express Streets and other	Amount (\$millions)	Percent of total
Express Streets *	\$7,752	25%
Other added road capacity	\$18,514	60%
Added rail and bus capacity	\$4,811	15%
Total added road and transit capacity **	\$31,077	100%

* Over half of these Express Street projects also involve road widening and/or new construction.

** The total reflects Express Streets and Added Road Capacity figures listed in Appendix N along with the added transit capacity figure listed in the Financial Analysis Summary in the RTP (The Appendix N does not include all added transit capacity projects.)

14 percent are between Loop 610 and Beltway 8.⁴ Most of the cost of the system, however, appears to be inside Beltway 8. Examples of projects include converting Westheimer and Bellaire along parts west of the Loop 610, into grade-separated Express Streets.

Why have Express Streets?

H-GAC says, "The implementation of "Express Streets" concept will reduce the need for many new lane miles of highway facilities, reduce congestion on existing highway facilities, provide air quality benefits, and improve regional mobility." However, the RTP doesn't quantify of these benefits as they relate to Express Streets. There is a chart in the document that shows how travel lengths and times will change as a result of the entire plan, but nothing specific to Express Streets. There is no quantification to air quality benefits either.

How will the region pay for them?

H-GAC has placed the Express Street system into the fiscally constrained part of the RTP, meaning they believe there will be sufficient revenue to pay for the system. However, before constructing any Express Street H-GAC must find a local city or county governmental agency that is willing to sponsor the project, including putting up some funds. It is unclear how this Express Street project "adoption" by local agencies would affect other projects in their budgets.

1. For more about Express Streets, see the RTP appendix, "Appendix H Operations and Management."

2. Spacing information from an H-GAC presentation to the Greater Houston Partnership dated January 29, 2004 and entitled "2025 Regional Transportation Plan."

3. It is unclear how many Express Streets are inside the City of Houston. Locations are not listed by city, but 40 percent of the centerline miles, and 78 percent of the costs are inside Harris County.

4. A chart in Appendix H (page 12) shows 53 percent of the Express Street expenditures would be spent inside Beltway 8. However, these are only conversion costs and do not include added capacity costs along those streets.