
LRT Construction Mitigation Studies

**HOUSTON, TEXAS:
METROPOLITAN TRANSIT
AUTHORITY OF HARRIS COUNTY**

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Synopsis

In contrast to the type of public mitigation available for the soon-to-be-opened line in Phoenix, Houston's light rail appears to be noticeably lacking in public outreach. Though the initial construction phase of the Harris County Metro Rail has come and gone – thus possibly limiting information concerning public relationships during this phase – it appears as though the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County proceeded while providing little consultation to local residents and business owners. This, no doubt, proved frustrating for the people of Houston but is potentially illuminating for us. Rather than focus on relationships and public discussion, concerning potential problems during construction, the city of Houston seems to have approached the construction of the METRO Rail by attempting to address the potential for problems before they occur. This can serve as a boon to us in the Central Corridor because it allows for the chance to juxtapose two very different types of approaches.

The focus of METRO and the city of Houston throughout the planning phases and into the construction schedule focused on delivering construction that was meant to limit the type and amount of disturbances to businesses within Houston. This approach was premised around limiting the physical disturbances that construction could potentially cause, including: construction schedules, removal of parking spaces, and noise, to name just a

few. The underlying premise seems to be that with this type of top-down planning problems can be foreseen and addressed before they arise. In keeping with this top-down approach METRO developed an additional branch to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority of Harris entitled METRO Solutions: a centralized, contained arm in charge of moving forward the development of transportation infrastructure within the county. This arm maintains responsibility for the future planning of METRO and for holding large-scale public meetings aimed at addressing any complaint local residents or business owners may have.



METRO Solutions

The planning and implementation arm of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, METRO Solutions takes is responsible to the public and government in terms of input and compliance as it seeks to drive METRO into the future and expand the transportation



infrastructure of the county. METRO solutions drafts project plans, conducts environmental impact assessments and provides public input via open forums for concerns, grievances and questions to come to the fore. The Board of Directors of METRO Solutions makes decisions concerning design and route placement for upcoming projects. METRO Solutions came about via a 2003 public referendum and since that time has lead the way in proposals concerning the expansion and modernizing of the county’s public transportation infrastructure. Once consensus among the governing body of METRO Solutions is reached decisions are handed down.

Constructions Concerns

Parking Space Removal

Given that the reduction of parking spaces along parts of the corridor is inevitable METRO and the city of Houston employed appraisers and land planners to determine whether or not a reduction in parking would adversely affect the viability of a business. If it was deemed that the viability of the business was sufficiently jeopardized, then business would be relocated in compliance with the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970.

Construction Schedules

Though it is unclear how regulations for construction were decided upon, METRO and the city of Houston set-forth a series of guidelines/regulations for the manner in which construction ought to occur with local residents and business owners in mind. First, businesses were to be notified of “down-periods” – when they would be without electricity, water, or gas at least two weeks in advance. These periods in which businesses would be without these services were to occur only during off-hours and never exceed 24 hours. For businesses in which an extended loss of electricity would be detrimental to their continued ability to perform, i.e. restaurants requiring food to be refrigerated, accommodations would be made. Finally, in the case that unknown utility works were discovered work was to be halted and businesses informed via utility companies, with an assessment by the companies occurring as soon as feasible.

Noise Concerns

In any large-scale construction project the noise of the work occurring will of course be a problem. To minimize the detrimental effects of the years of noise that would need to occur, METRO developed a series of guidelines to ensure that contractors kept the best interests of local residents and business owners in mind. With this in mind the goal was set to minimize nighttime construction – particularly along residential areas. Where feasible, equipment outfitted with quieting technology was to be employed. In terms of equipment location the onus fell to contractors and construction foremen to position equipment motors so that, when possible, they are removed from sound sensitive sights. Finally, construction-related traffic, both in terms of detours and routes taken by construction-equipment, were to avoid residential neighborhoods.

Closure/Traffic Rerouting

With the destruction of city streets it follows that temporary infrastructure would be needed. METRO and the city of Houston endeavored to rebuild the city's hardscape along the construction route. This meant the creation of temporary medians and curbs, the installation of new signage and warnings to drivers and pedestrians.

Phased Construction Planning

Given limited resources, it would be nearly impossible for this project to have been completed all at once, thus the need to have mitigation guidelines in place. Given this time horizon it was identified as crucial to METRO that there be in-place a phased-construction plan so that, when certain areas were affected, it wouldn't totally choke-off an entire neighborhood. Limiting construction segments meant that people would not avoid whole swaths of a community for perhaps months at a time and traffic would still flow to businesses.

Appendix A

Contact information for METRO Community
Outreach

Community Outreach

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