

October 19, 2020

The Honorable Laura Ryan
Commissioner
Texas Transportation Commissioner
125 E. 11th Street
Austin, TX 78701

RE: NHHIP FEIS Comment Period Extension Request from
US 59/I-69 at Spur 527 to I-45 at Beltway 8 North CSJ:
0912-00-146 Harris County, Texas

Dear Commissioner Ryan:

I request that your office seek a 120-days Federal Register Comment period for the NHHIP FEIS construction plan.

As the Member of Congress representing the 18th Congressional District, which includes areas around that will be directly impacted by the construction project, I have a special interest in the announced plan and its environmental impact. On November 6, 2019, I hosted a meeting in my Houston District Office with representatives from the Texas Department of Transportation and community activists on plans for construction on I-45. I provided written comment on the project and participated in oral testimony during the public hearing held on July 28, 2020.

I write to you regarding the publication of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) on the website for the North Houston Highway Improvement Project (NHHIP), which states that a 30-day comment period would be requested when notice is published in the Federal Register. The options for public comment periods can be up to 120 days to allow robust public participation in the decisions that will be made regarding the planned construction project.

The FEIS is 8,189 pages in three volumes: 380 pages in Volume 1; 5,949 pages in Volume 2; and 2,240 pages in Volume 3. All three volumes are important and require detailed review. Thirty days is simply inadequate time for our offices, other organizations involved in the project, and most importantly, our constituents who are the most directly impacted by the project, to review and comment on the FEIS.

Over the course of the last several years, I have heard from concerned constituents and organizations regarding the importance of this project to the region and the significant impacts NHHIP will have on the immediately adjacent low-income residents and communities of color, which I represent in Congress. These communities,

TxDot, and the city of Houston and Harris County need NHHIP to be an overwhelming success – especially for those communities directly impacted by the project. It is in TxDOT's interest to hear from as many people as possible as the agency charts a path forward for implementing, managing and concluding this effort by listening to those who will likely be at greatest risk of being directly impacted by the project so that every effort can be made to deliver improvements to their quality-of-life and avoid re-harming communities in ways similar to past development projects, which hamper acceptance of new construction efforts.

Because we have seen marked reductions in citizen participation in the decennial census due to COVID-19, which likely means the notice and comment for this important project will have a delay in reaching the public. It is in TxDOT's interest to ensure that significant time is given for public engagement on the topic of the planned construction.

As an elected official, I work on behalf of my constituents to ensure that the project is inclusive and transparent from the beginning because this will serve the communities I represent and TxDot. As I stated in my August 20, 2020 comments, I am concerned regarding the planned construction's impact on historic places that are near I-45 and relevant to a new initiative under the Nation Parks Service to designate a new National Historic Trail that would run from Galveston into the city of Houston and involve I-45. The proposed expansion of I-45 north of downtown to Beltway 8 will result in impacts to neighborhoods along either side of I-45 North, as hundreds of residents' face displacement. Located just northwest of the intersection of I-610 and I-45, the historic neighborhood of Independence Heights is one of those neighborhoods facing said impacts.

In 2019 when TxDOT made public its report on the Project's expected impacts to historical resources required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the agency inexplicably left Independence Heights out of its survey. This occurred despite the fact that Independence Heights is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the first state chartered community of former slaves and is a destination site on state historic heritage trails such as the Texas Independence Trail and holds the distinction as the first town incorporated by African Americans in the state of Texas.

Efforts by your office to address community concerns and must include clear mitigation strategies reflected in the FEIS, such as:

- Allowing residents and employees to remain in place by minimizing displacement of single-family, multi-family, and public housing homes and businesses (over 1,000 units are currently for displacement);
- Protecting historical and cultural sites identified by community residents;
- Improving neighborhood-level air quality impacts;
- Protecting greenspace and parks within each impacted neighborhood;
- Erecting two direction transit lanes;
- Installing BRT Stations along the route of I-45;
- Bringing IH-45 North up to current safety design standards;
- Designing two-lane frontage roads as city streets;
- Improving drainage on Little White Oak and Halls Bayous;
- Substantially mitigating flooding in Independence Heights;

- Saves costs to taxpayers; and
- Improves bicycle and pedestrian safety, especially at crossings over and under I-45.

I ask your full and fair consideration of this request to extend the comment period from 30 to 120 days to allow local government and our constituents adequate time to review the FEIS for the NHHIP.

Very truly yours,



Sheila Jackson Lee
MEMBER OF CONGRESS