



Honorable Chair Terry Canales and Members of the House Committee on Transportation,

Texas faces a number of challenges regarding transportation and land use and their effects on public health and climate change; these issues will likely worsen if appropriate actions are not taken. For example, according to a 2017 emissions inventory, the majority of air pollution in Harris County is from mobile sources. Additionally, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the transportation sector have gone up 52% since 1990 in Texas. Transportation systems are vital components of communities and cities that allow the movement of people and goods in an efficient manner that also significantly impact air quality and public health. With its increasing combination of urban, suburban, and rural communities, the need to look at the long-term health impacts of our policy and infrastructure decisions could not be more important. For example, with regard to transportation, in 2014 the Houston-area ranked near the bottom (182 out of 220) among the largest sprawling metro areas. A higher degree of sprawl, as measured by the Sprawl Index, increases vehicle miles traveled and has been associated with higher levels of obesity and lower life expectancies among other quality of life issues.

Research suggests that cities with a higher degree of sprawl also have a higher number of ozone exceedances than more compact metropolitan areas. The Houston area has the highest vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in Texas and is forecasted to add an additional 50 million VMT by 2050. Moreover, the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) estimates that because of population growth, there will be 61% more vehicles on the road by 2045. Last year, the Houston region experienced thirty-three high ozone days and, according to the 2019 American Lung Association State of the Air Report, was ranked 9th for most ozone-polluted cities. Ground-level ozone can trigger asthma attacks, inflame and damage airways, and cause chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Moreover, air toxics from mobile sources, such as benzene and formaldehyde, can cause damage to the immune system, reproductive and neurological disorders, and respiratory problems.

Transportation policies that have prioritized the building of roads and highway infrastructure, coupled with poor land use planning, have contributed to many health and environmental inequities in Houston. These policy decisions have fragmented many communities of color, undermined funding for alternative modes of transportation, facilitated a sprawling landscape, increasing the distance between homes and jobs, and advanced residential segregation. The Federal Executive Order 12898 instructs agencies to “make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high adverse human health and environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations in the United States.” Thus, strengthening community engagement of historically excluded groups into transportation decision-making processes is not only necessary but is also a requirement.

In addition to causing local and regional air quality issues, Houston’s transportation systems and practices significantly contribute to ongoing climate change and the subsequent crises that climate change will cause. The City of Houston’s recently released Climate Action Plan (CAP) identified the transportation sector as a source of nearly half of all greenhouse gas emissions within city limits. Reducing transportation-related GHG emissions will be necessary to mitigate the worst effects of climate change-induced ecological disaster.

Building sustainable, accessible multimodal infrastructure, such as mass transit, is essential to mitigating transportation related air pollutants and GHGs. However, almost all of Texas’ state transportation funding is constitutionally dedicated to on-system freeway projects; very little of it can be used for multimodal projects. Compounding this issue, TxDOT mixes most of the discretionary federal funding it receives with the state money, rendering it unusable for multimodal projects.

In order to give TxDOT greater flexibility in supporting multimodal projects, we ask the House Committee on Transportation explore legislation to remove the statutory barriers barring state funding from being used on alternative modes of transportation.

Sincerely,

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