

Houston High-Speed Rail Watch

Our mission: to be a voice for Houston's neighborhoods by advocating smart connectivity between the high-speed rail station and downtown.



If the Proposed Texas Bullet Train or High-Speed Rail (HSR) Project Comes to Houston: A Smart Connectivity Proposal to Downtown

What is Houston High-Speed Rail Watch?

Houston High-Speed Rail Watch is a group of civic leaders who live in neighborhoods along the Union Pacific (UP) and Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) rail lines. We have been monitoring the proposed Texas Bullet Train or Houston-to-Dallas high-speed rail (HSR) project since early 2015, when the routes originally presented for HSR to reach downtown Houston threatened many established neighborhoods. Our membership includes representatives from Inwood Forest, Oak Forest, Garden Oaks, Independence Heights, West End, First Ward, Sixth Ward, and Super Neighborhoods 5, 12, 22, and 51. Our mission is to advocate for smart connectivity between Houston's high-speed rail station and downtown, and to protect established neighborhoods. We are very active in following and researching details and updates regarding HSR. We invite you to join our efforts by supporting and advocating for our position.

For more information about our group and work, please visit www.houstonhsrwatch.org.

Executive Summary

If the proposed Texas Bullet Train or HSR plans were to move forward, we are advocating for an elevated METRORail (light rail) or BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) line that would run down the center lanes of I-10 to connect HSR's end terminus near the Northwest Transit Center with downtown. This connection would unify scattered strands of Houston's public transportation network and facilitate connectivity to downtown for HSR riders, without adversely affecting neighborhood communities. It would also serve Houston-area commuters and promote a reduction of cars on the road. Plus, with a modest number of stops, it would become an express rail line attractive to both local commuters and to high-speed rail riders traveling into downtown.

Background on the High-Speed Rail (HSR) Project

In late October 2014, Houston communities learned studies were being conducted by a private company, Texas Central Railway (TCR), now Texas Central Partners (TCP), and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), to investigate ways to build HSR that would connect Dallas and Houston. There were several routes considered, including routes that would take the rail into downtown Houston following the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) and Union Pacific (UP) rail lines. These routes, if followed into downtown Houston, would have been extremely damaging to many Houston neighborhoods.

From November 1, 2014 to January 9, 2015, a public comment period was held where hundreds of Houston residents expressed opposition to HSR going into downtown Houston via their neighborhoods. A corridor analysis was then conducted by the FRA to determine the most viable route and stop. Through this analysis, TCP concluded they would build the rail line along the so-called Hempstead Utility Corridor (US 290) and locate a Houston station in the area of the I-10/610/290 exchange close to the Northwest Transit Center. This is still the current plan, but final approval by the FRA has not been granted.¹ The FRA released a draft EIS for this project in December 2017 and the FRA accepted public comments until March 9, 2018. TCP and the FRA to analyze the comments, address the concerns, and publish the final EIS (FEIS). Only after the publication of the FEIS and the approval of the project by the FRA can TCP begin construction of the project.

HSR Needs Connectivity to Downtown Houston

Although there was a push from some groups and individuals to extend HSR into downtown Houston, the FRA concluded that going downtown via the BNSF or UP routes through neighborhoods would not be

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economically and environmentally feasible. The FRA also concluded the I-10 corridor would be too difficult for the HSR to use to travel into downtown due to the turn radius and design needed to make the proposed HSR route continuous, safe, and timely.

Houston has multiple commercial centers rather than a single dominant central business district, so a stop near the I-10/610/290 exchange and Northwest Transit Center makes sense. It enables business riders, TCP's core ridership, to easily access other key areas of our city like the Energy Corridor, Galleria area, and Uptown Park. However, since a significant number of riders may need to go downtown, connectivity to downtown must be addressed. Recognizing this, neighborhood leaders have come together, attended transportation meetings to learn more about various proposals, taken input from government transportation agenciesⁱⁱ, and agreed on a plan that we believe would benefit all Houstonians while preserving our neighborhoods.

Connecting the NW Transit Center Area to Downtown Via Public Transit

In recent years, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO) has made an enormous investment in expanding light rail in the City of Houston. Several lines bringing people into and around the city are well established, and ridership on this mode of transportation is increasing. Extending existing METRORail lines to the proposed HSR end terminus at I-10/610/290 would transport HSR riders downtown while serving the Houston community as a whole.

METRORail's Purple and Green lines currently terminate at the Theater District stop downtown. To reach an HSR station in the vicinity of the Northwest Transit Center, these lines could be extended to I-10 using the existing HOV ramp located near the downtown Post Office, route north in the I-45 expansion corridor within existing right-of-way, and continue elevated above I-10's center lanes to HSR's end terminus. A few elevated stations along the way could serve local riders. This plan would connect a portion of the city that has yet to be linked to METRORail, provide additional local commuting options, and offer a much needed connection for HSR riders traveling to downtown Houston.

BRT, high-speed bus service running on dedicated lanes, has also received a lot of attention in recent years. It is a less-expensive alternative and also a possibility. BRT service could be routed similarly, but without the expense of laying fixed track.

Conclusion

In light of the Houston-to-Dallas HSR project, Houstonians must consider sensible ways to incorporate a new NW-Downtown connection into the City's existing transportation network. Mass transit options should be available to move people to where they want and need to go in ways that would help all Houstonians, while still preserving our communities and neighborhoods. Our proposed public-transportation extension down the I-10 corridor will accomplish this goal.

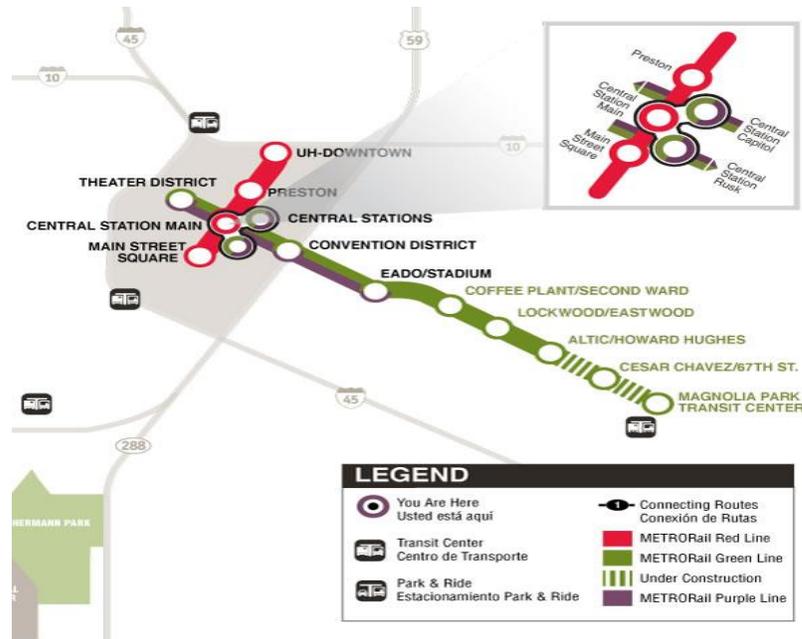
ⁱ For any major transportation project in the United States to begin, the project must undergo a screening to see if it meets the standards and guidelines under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). If the project does not comply with NEPA standards, it will not receive federal clearance to move forward. Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) are assessments of the likelihood of impacts from various alternative courses of action and are required from all Federal agencies as part of the NEPA requirements.

ⁱⁱ Transportation meetings attended: Houston City Council, City of Houston's Transportation, Technology and Infrastructure Committee, Gulf Coast Rail District board meetings, METRO board meetings, Houston Galveston Area Council's (HGAC) Transportation Policy Council, HGAC's Technical Advisory Committee, and public meetings hosted by Texas Central Partners.



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METRORail's Existing Green Line



METRORail's Existing Purple Line

