

**ATTACHMENT B**

**SEPT 5, 2013 OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY**

## **OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY**

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Federal Highway Administration / Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority / TxDOT  
Austin District  
MoPac Improvement Project: From Parmer Lane to Cesar Chavez Street  
CSJ: 3136-01-107

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### **PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS:**

The Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (Mobility Authority), in coordination with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is in the final design and construction phase of a project to improve the MoPac Expressway from Parmer Lane to Cesar Chavez Street, a distance of approximately 11 miles. The proposed improvements involve adding an express lane in each direction to the existing facility.

### **PURPOSE AND NEED OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT:**

Transportation improvements are needed in the project area because of increasing strain on the existing transportation infrastructure due to population and economic growth in the Austin metropolitan area. Rapid growth throughout the region has strained the capacity of the local transportation system, including MoPac and adjacent roadways. As the metropolitan area has grown, travel demand in the MoPac corridor has continued to increase, with forecasts indicating a continuation of this trend well into the future. The number of vehicles traveling on MoPac has increased in tandem with the Austin area's rapidly growing population. Currently, MoPac becomes congested for several hours every day during peak hours of travel. The high travel demand during these peak hours results in slower travel speeds and longer travel times. Congestion results in increased travel time at a cost to travelers, both in terms of fuel consumption and time lost. These conditions, which are projected to worsen in response to continued population and economic growth, indicate a need for transportation improvements.

The purpose of the proposed project is to:

- Improve mobility and operational efficiency by accommodating the movement of people and goods;
- Facilitate congestion management in the corridor;
- Provide a reliable route for transit that will reduce travel times;
- Maximize use of the facility without reducing reliability; and,
- Facilitate reliable emergency response.

By fulfilling this purpose, the proposed improvements would meet the need to address unreliable operations caused by increasing congestion in the MoPac corridor.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT APPROVAL:**

FHWA approved the EA and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) in August 2012. During detailed design, potential refinements were identified and proposed that would result in changes to the project design and potential environmental impacts included in the EA/FONSI. The Open House was initiated to provide the public with the opportunity to review the proposed changes and offer feedback.

Two changes to the design evaluated in the EA and approved with the FONSI are proposed triggering the need for the Open House. One proposed design change occurs in the express lane direct connector ramps from Cesar Chavez to MoPac northbound and from MoPac southbound to Cesar Chavez. The original design included elevated express lane entrance and

## OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY

---

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---

exit ramps crossing over the main lanes. The Express Lane entry and exit ramps into and out of Downtown Austin would be changed from traversing over the main lanes of MoPac to going under the main lanes of MoPac. The second proposed change involves the restriping of the configuration of the southbound exit to Cesar Chavez Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Street to allow for an additional lane where the Express Lane ties to the Cesar Chavez ramp and to allow Express Lane traffic to access both Cesar Chavez and 5<sup>th</sup> Street.

Two other minor design changes are proposed for which TxDOT and the Mobility Authority elicited public feedback as part of the Open House. These are described below.

In the EA/FONSI, Sound Wall #9 was determined not feasible because of constructability and utility constraints due to a 42 inch water line and existing high power transmission poles located in an area of extremely narrow right of way between the edge of pavement and existing right of way. As part of the MoPac Improvement Project, the waterline at this location will be re-located outside of TxDOT right of way and the existing 42 inch water line inside TxDOT right of way will remain abandoned in place. However, constructability constraints from the transmission poles and narrow ROW prevent removing the abandoned pipe. Therefore, Sound Wall #9 constructability constraints remain due to the abandoned 42 inch pipe. As a result, the construction of Sound Wall #9 is still determined not feasible.

Relative to the schematic design reviewed and approved as part of the EA/FONSI, the northbound exit to Steck Avenue is proposed to be moved 75 feet north and the northbound Steck Avenue Collector Distributor entrance from the northbound frontage road is proposed to be moved 100 feet north. There are no changes in access associated with this design change.

### **PUBLIC NOTICE:**

A legal notice of the Open House was published in *The Austin American Statesman* on August 4 and 26, 2013 (see **Appendix A**).

Invitations to the Open House were mailed to public and elected officials, and the notice was mailed to over 60 project stakeholders, including the adjacent property owners. The project partners also posted the notice on the Mobility Authority and TxDOT websites.

### **OPEN HOUSE DATE AND PLACE:**

The Open House was held on Thursday September 5, 2013, at the O. Henry Middle School Cafeteria located at 2610 W. 10<sup>th</sup> Street in the city of Austin in Travis County, Texas.

### **ATTENDANCE:**

Approximately ninety-four (94) people, including City Councilmember Laura Morrison, registered their attendance at the Open House. Twenty-eight (28) representatives from TxDOT, the Mobility Authority and the Design-Build Contractor were also in attendance. Sign in sheets from the Open House are included in **Appendix B**.

### **OPEN HOUSE STAFFED BY:**

Jon Geiselbrecht, *TxDOT Austin District*  
Sean Beal, *Mobility Authority*  
Frank Scerbo, *Design-Build Contractor CH2MHILL*  
TxDOT, Mobility Authority, and Contractor Staff

## **OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY**

---

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---

### **EXHIBITS AND HANDOUTS:**

Proposed design changes, approved Environmental Assessment, and 3D video representation of the project, including the changes were available for review. Handouts included: a welcome guide with Frequently Asked Questions and a comment form. Copies of the handouts/displays and photos of the Open House are located in **Appendices C** and **D**, respectively.

### **PUBLIC COMMENTS:**

One (1) oral comment was presented to the court reporter during the Open House. The transcript is included in **Appendix E**. One hundred and sixty-eight (168) written comments were received by the close of the public comment period, Monday, September 16, 2013. Written comments were submitted during the Open House, mailed, or emailed to TxDOT or the Mobility Authority.

**SUMMARY:** The majority of the written comments (112 out of 168) (see **Appendix F**) support the proposed re-striping and re-signing of the southbound exit to 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Fifty-six (56) comments opposed the restriping of the 5<sup>th</sup> Street exit for a variety of reasons. Included among these reasons are: a perceived increase in traffic volume along 5<sup>th</sup> Street; presumed conflicts with pedestrians and bicyclists; effects to adjacent businesses and residential areas; perceived driver safety issues at the merge between the southbound express lane and the general purpose lanes; concern that 5<sup>th</sup> Street is not designed to be a collector for downtown traffic; concern for increased congestion at the intersection of 5<sup>th</sup> Street and Lamar Boulevard; and suggestions that Cesar Chavez is a more appropriate thoroughfare for downtown traffic.

Several opponents of the 5<sup>th</sup> Street re-striping suggested adding “Downtown” to the overhead sign directing traffic to Cesar Chavez rather than 5<sup>th</sup> Street.

Proponents of the 5<sup>th</sup> Street re-striping cited primarily a desire not to see additional vehicles on Cesar Chavez and to preserve multiple routes into downtown from the MoPac express lanes.

There were six (6) comments specifically noting support for the proposed change to the elevated express lane ramps to and from Cesar Chavez and one comment not in support of this change.

Eleven (11) comments noted support for the abandonment of the existing 42” waterline north of 35<sup>th</sup> Street in place and the relocation of the line to an alternate location. One comment noted that a provision should be made to drain the area to allow Sound Wall #9 to be implemented.

Eight (8) comments noted support for the adjustment of the on- and off-ramp locations near Steck Avenue.

Nine (9) comments were submitted on topics unrelated to the design changes for which the Open House was held and for which the reevaluation of the EA/FONSI is being developed.

## OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY

---

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---

### COMMENT RESPONSE SUMMARY

#### ORAL COMMENTS:

One oral comment was received through the court reporter provided for the Open House. The comment was not related to the subject of the meeting (design changes relative to the schematic design approved in the EA/FONSI). A copy of the transcript is included as **Appendix E**.

#### WRITTEN COMMENTS:

**56 respondents** indicated opposition to the 5<sup>th</sup> Street re-striping for various reasons, including a perceived increase in traffic along 5<sup>th</sup> Street and the potential effects on adjacent businesses and residential areas, congestion at the intersection of 5<sup>th</sup> Street and Lamar Boulevard, and potential driver safety issues at the express lane ramp to 5<sup>th</sup> Street.

##### Response:

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority have proposed the restriping of the Express Lane ramp to add a lane therefore removing a merge condition and improving operations. The revision also includes a change to signing and striping to the Express Lane to weave over one lane and access 5th street. The added access provides consistent service for both Express Lane and general purpose lane traffic. This conforms to TxDOT and the Mobility Authority's goal of providing mobility options, particularly to transit and emergency vehicles.

Regarding the concern for increased traffic volumes (a concern raised previously during the development of the project), a series of studies were conducted to look at the various issues. The first study, conducted by CDM Smith in March 2012, was an operational traffic model of the southbound Express Lane exit ramp. The model indicated that allowing access to both Cesar Chavez and 5th Street would be operationally acceptable. In May 2012, the Texas A&M Transportation Institute conducted a peer review, which found no issues with the CDM Smith modeling.

At the same time, the Network Modeling Center at the University of Texas was engaged to conduct a Dynamic Traffic Assignment Model for Cesar Chavez and 5th Street leading into downtown Austin. The proposed Pressler Street connection and additional traffic signals on 5th Street were taken into account. The model found there were no significant differences in traffic count flow between the two routes regardless of whether 5th Street access was provided or not. HNTB did a peer review of the findings in May 2012 and found no issues with the result.

A third peer review of both studies was conducted by Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB). PB issued their findings in January 2013. They determined the previous studies were reasonable and properly identified the likely results of the Express Lane connection to downtown. The report indicated the merge condition on the exit ramp would create a weaving situation that is not ideal, but is common in other locations. PB suggested that

## OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY

---

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---

uncertainty regarding future land use along both corridors made predicting long-term attractiveness of various access scenarios difficult. PB recommended adding an additional lane to improve traffic operations to the downtown exits; essentially making the far left lane 5th Street access only, drivers in the middle lane could access downtown on either 5th Street or Cesar Chavez, and the far right lane Cesar Chavez only.

Based on these results it was determined that there would be no project-related changes to the existing conditions on 5th street, including for pedestrians and bicycles, effects to adjacent businesses and residential areas, and increased congestion at the intersection of 5th street and Lamar Boulevard. 5th Street is currently a collector for downtown traffic, as it is an existing exit from MoPac. The proposed design change is consistent with that use. In regards to the potential for a “downtown” overhead sign for Cesar Chavez, this is under consideration by TxDOT but is outside the scope of the current study.

**112 respondents** indicated support for the re-striping and re-signing of 5<sup>th</sup> Street primarily due to the concern for directing additional traffic onto Cesar Chavez Street and an interest in providing multiple access routes to downtown from the southbound MoPac express lane.

Response:

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority have noted these comments and incorporated them into the project file.

**1 respondent** indicated opposition to the proposed change to eliminate the elevated ramps to and from Cesar Chavez Street in favor of ramps that cross under the MoPac main lanes.

Response:

The proposed design to eliminate the elevated express lane ramps to and from Cesar Chavez and build the ramps under the mainlanes was proposed by the Design-Build Contractor and accepted by TxDOT and the Mobility Authority as an improvement over the previously approved design. The elevated ramps are more costly and have a greater visual and aesthetic effect on the surrounding area.

**11 respondents** indicated support for the abandonment of the 42” water line in place combined with the relocation of the line outside TxDOT right of way.

Response:

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority have noted these comments and incorporated them into the project file.

**1 respondent** opposed the relocation of the 42 inch water line on the basis that leaving it in place would allow for Sound Wall #9 to be constructed.

Response:

In the EA/FONSI, Sound Wall #9 was determined not feasible because of constructability and utility constraints due to the 42 inch water line and existing high power transmission poles located in an area of extremely narrow right of way between

## OPEN HOUSE SUMMARY

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Austin District  
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CSJ: 3136-01-107

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the edge of pavement and existing right of way. The waterline at this location will be re-located outside of TxDOT right of way and the existing 42 inch water line inside TxDOT right of way will remain abandoned in place. However, constructability constraints from the transmission poles and narrow ROW prevent removing the abandoned pipe. Therefore, Sound Wall #9 constructability constraints remain due to the abandoned 42 inch pipe. As a result, the construction of Sound Wall #9 is still determined not feasible.

**8 respondents** indicated support for the proposed relocation of the northbound exit to Steck Avenue 75 feet north and the northbound Steck Avenue Collector Distributor entrance from the northbound frontage road 100 feet north.

Response:

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority have noted these comments and incorporated them into the project file.

**1 respondent** requested information on whether input from public officials, nearby residents, or nearby business owners was a factor in the decision to 1) move the ramp underneath the main lanes instead of over them, and 2) allow traffic from the toll lane to access both 5<sup>th</sup> Street and Cesar Chavez rather than just Cesar Chavez after approval of the environmental document.

Response:

The proposed design to eliminate the elevated express lane ramps to and from Cesar Chavez and build the ramps under the mainlanes was proposed by the Design-Build Contractor and accepted by TxDOT and the Mobility Authority as an improvement over the previously approved design. The elevated ramps are more costly and have a greater visual and aesthetic effect on the surrounding area.

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority have proposed the re-striping of the express lane ramp to Cesar Chavez and 5<sup>th</sup> Street to correct a potential operational issue with the express lane merge into the general purpose lane heading to Cesar Chavez. Providing a dedicated lane for the express lane to Cesar Chavez and 5<sup>th</sup> Street is considered by TxDOT and the Mobility Authority to be an improvement over the previously proposed and approved design. The design will conform to TxDOT and FHWA standards for highway design.

**9 respondents** commented on aspects of the project that were not related to the specific design changes that triggered the need to conduct the Open House. These comments have been noted and incorporated into the project record.

Response:

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority have noted these comments and incorporated them into the project file.

### RECOMMENDATION:

TxDOT and the Mobility Authority plan to move ahead with the proposed design changes and are in the process of developing a reevaluation of the 2012 EA/FONSI. In the reevaluation, the

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CSJ: 3136-01-107

---

proposed changes are evaluated with respect to the potential for additional impacts not previously considered in the EA, and any changes are documented.