H-GAC Halts TxDOT Project

Friday, November 16, 2007
By: Laurie Johnson

A loosely organized group of concerned citizens have convinced members of the Houston-Galveston Area Council to veto a $36 million dollar transportation project. As Houston Public Radio's Laurie Johnson reports -- TxDOT had plans to build two overpasses on Highway Six -- but residents and business owners vehemently opposed and successfully defeated the plan.

TxDOT has been planning to build two overpasses -- one at the intersection of Westheimer and Highway 6 and the other at the intersection of Bellaire and Highway 6. David Harbers, who owns a Shipley’s Donuts franchise, and several other business owners and community members made comments at H-GAC’s Transportation Policy Council, urging the members to vote against the project because they say it will destroy commerce and do nothing to truly alleviate congestion and mobility in the Highway 6 corridor. Turns out, the council agreed. Harbers says he's overwhelmed by the decision.

"The little man was finally able to win. They finally listened to the people that are in the public rather than just doing it because we got money."

And there definitely was money -- $36 million to be exact. The money was a chunk of safety bond funding awarded to the Houston region specifically for these overpass projects. And since the projects were scrapped, the money goes back to the state for use elsewhere. TxDOT District Engineer Gary Trietsch says he’s not disappointed about losing the money, as much as he’s concerned this decision will delay any progress in that corridor.

"There's a real safety problem at these intersections and it's amazing that everybody can look at the same numbers and come up with different conclusions. But that's part of the process and that's fine. I'm more concerned about the safety aspect whether it had been $36 million or $36. We will try to find other solutions to try to mitigate the accidents and go on from here."

Three members of the council voted to move forward with the project, but the remaining members voted it down, including Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, who says the voice of the community underscored the need for a long-term plan to relieve congestion in that area.

"There are a lot of cases where the community doesn’t want a transportation improvement, but it’s still the right thing to do. In this case, it was more a question of are we building these overpasses just because the money's available as opposed to building them because they're part of a master plan that needs to be done. And the answer came back that they were kind of independent projects, so I think we need to look at a comprehensive approach to Highway 6 and not do it piecemeal."

A comprehensive solution was the mantra of community speakers and most members of the council. But TxDOT is facing budget cuts of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding and it may be years before any solution that's developed can be implemented. Laurie Johnson, Houston Public Radio News.