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Plans for Texas 6 overpasses at Bellaire, Westheimer axed

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Texas 6 overpasses proposed by the Texas Department of Transportation at Bellaire Boulevard and Westheimer are off the drawing board.

The Transportation Policy Council of the Houston-Galveston Area Council on Nov. 16 rejected the recommendation for the overpasses, which TxDOT staff said would improve safety at the intersections.

Residents of southwest Houston, local business owners, Alief school district officials and state Rep. Hubert Vo, D-Alief, opposed the overpasses, saying they would destroy local businesses and lead to economic blight.

Gary Trietsch, TxDOT's Houston district engineer, said the $36 million allotted by the state under the safety bond program for the two overpasses cannot be spent on any other project and will be returned to the state.

Trietsch, TxDOT's Beaumont district engineer John Barton and H-GAC representative Steve Howard were the only three members of the council who voted against the motion to reject the overpasses.

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett raised questions about the feasibility of the overpasses and sought to kill the idea forever, instead of delaying a decision pending another comprehensive study.

Houston City Councilwoman Sue Lovell seconded Emmett's motion.

Transportation council member Bill King said he has never seen a project that was so unanimously opposed by residents.

The meeting began with comments from Vo, who was not present but spoke to the council by telephone.

Vo said building the overpasses might possibly reduce accidents at the intersections and somewhat improve mobility at those particular places but at a great expense to taxpayers.

He added the overpasses were an unwise use of taxpayers' money and it would be financially smarter to build raised medians.
"Building the overpasses at Bellaire and Westheimer is a band-aid approach. It will not fix the problems or will not address the long-term situation," Vo said.

He called for long range mobility planning in the area.

Vo's comments were endorsed by Anne Williams, a representative of the Alief Super Neighborhood Council; Charles Woods, deputy superintendent of Alief ISD; Mike Martin, a representative of the Mission Bend Homeowners Association Council; David Harbers, an area businessman; and others.

Alan Clark, H-GAC's director of transportation planning, presented recent accident data to justify the overpasses.

He also presented a summary of alternatives for the two intersections. They include doing nothing; building medians and improving access management; and building the overpasses.

The access management projects for the two intersections would cost about $2 million, as opposed to $36 million for the overpasses, Clark said.

He said the overpasses provided the maximum impact.

The H-GAC is conducting another study for TxDOT regarding access management on Texas 6 from Interstate 10 to FM 521 in Arcola.

TxDOT may be able to implement the recommendations of that study in the next two to four years, Trietsch said, but funding must be found for those projects.

Clark recommended a major corridor study to examine the long-term development and travel growth on Texas 6; evaluate multi-modal transportation for discussion with residents and businesses; and prepare a preferred alternative for inclusion in the Regional Transportation Plan.

Emmett said when the major corridor study is done the overpasses may not be part of the solution.

"I see no sense in spending $36 million, which ultimately may be no part of the solution," he said.

Trietsch asked the transportation council to reconsider a proposed overpass on Texas 6 at FM 529, which Copperfield residents opposed.