



# WHAT'S SO GRAND about the

# GRAND PARKWAY?

By Greg Varhaug

**W**hen the Grand Parkway, Texas State Highway 99, is completed in 2020, Houston will be the only city in the United States circled by three contiguous highway loops. The Grand Parkway's completion will mark the end of a series of highway expansions first proposed more than 40 years ago.

Freeway systems in other American cities, like Dallas or Los Angeles, include loops. But their freeways are laid out in crisscrossing, grid-like patterns. By contrast, Houston's freeways radiate out from its center, like spokes in a wheel. The spokes are then connected to one another by two loops. The innermost loop, I-610, is 38 miles long and about five miles from downtown, give or take. Beltway 8 is 88 miles long and was opened in the late 1980s. It's about eight to ten miles out from I-610, depending on where you are. The Grand Parkway will be Houston's third and final loop; there isn't room for another. But the Grand Parkway is not the last new highway project planned for the Houston area. Developers now have their sights set on the prairies and farmland west of Houston.

## Opening Segment E

In December, TxDOT opened Segment E of the Grand Parkway, which is 15.2 miles long and connects I-10 with SH 290. This was the third completed segment. The adjoining Segment D, 18.2 miles long and stretching between I-10 and US 59 to the south, opened back in 1994. The next adjoining segments are scheduled to open in 2015 and will run to Tomball and Spring, adding 24 more miles. Segment I-2, a 14.5-mile segment that runs from SH 146 to I-10, opened in 2008. Eight more segments remain to be built. When completed, the Grand Parkway will be more than 180 miles in length, making it the longest beltway in the United States.

The Grand Parkway was first proposed in the mid-1960s. That's when it initially appeared in freeway master plans issued by the City of Houston. Plans for the Grand Parkway were canceled at one point in the late 1970s but were then revived in the 1980s; they have been part of Houston's freeway master plans ever since. The 610 Loop and Beltway 8 are both contained entirely within Harris County, but the Grand Parkway will run through parts of eight counties. Harris County paid for some of the initial studies but later turned the project funding over to TxDOT.

The Grand Parkway will begin and end at SH 146. At the intersection of 16<sup>th</sup> Street, south of Kemah, it will trace a circle around Dickinson, Alvin, Rosharon, and Greatwood, move north to Cypress, and then head to Tomball, Spring, New Caney, and Dayton. It will cross I-45, US 59, and I-10 twice each. It will terminate at SH 146, about 10 miles north of its starting point at the intersection with 16<sup>th</sup> Street.

## Criticism of the Project

Quite a bit of controversy surrounded the construction of Beltway 8 back in the 1980s. Voters approved the bond measure to build it by a wide margin, but many people remained opposed, largely because they did not want to see a new toll road built. The fact is, with fuel taxes declining and construction costs rising, any new freeways will likely be toll roads.

Critics of the Grand Parkway project have raised many of the same issues as those vaunted during the debate over whether to build Beltway 8. No residential or commercial development has occurred anywhere on the newly opened Segment E. Many citizens, in letters of protest, have called it a "road to nowhere." They believe it's a giveaway to real estate developers, that it's just more sprawl, and that it disproportionately benefits the west side of the city. It's also

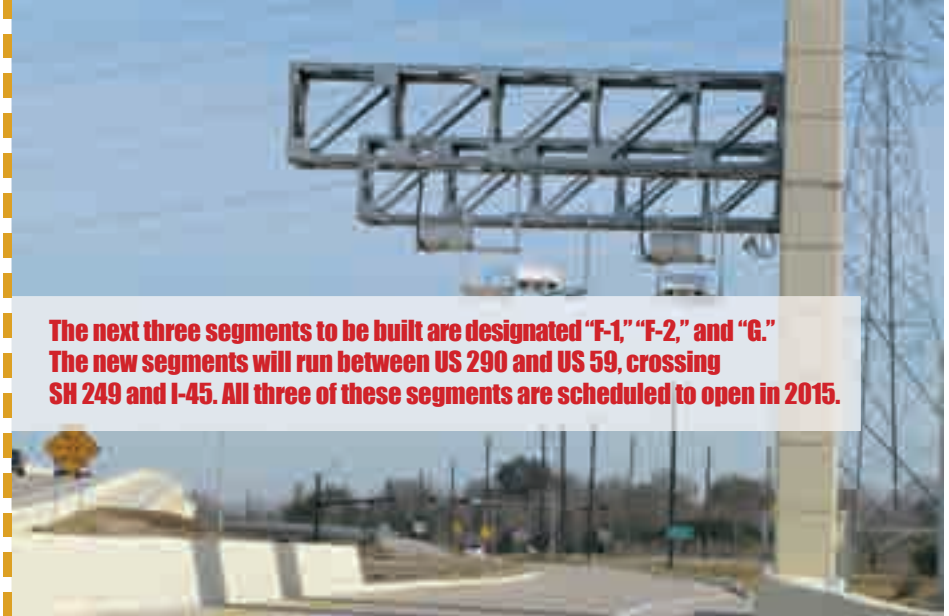
a little unsettling that some Texas Transportation Commission and Grand Parkway Association (GPA) board members are themselves developers and high-powered political donors who have a vested interest in the project.

Property values along Segment D of the Grand Parkway south of I-10 have skyrocketed since it first opened in 1994. Real estate agents are delighted at the prospect of the new development that will inevitably spring up along the route. There's every reason to believe that property values along the new Segment E will also increase over time, as they have in neighborhoods along Segment D like Cinco Ranch, Seven Meadows, and Grand Lakes.

Opponents of the Grand Parkway also question how much it will help alleviate traffic congestion on the freeways that connect to it. It's difficult to see how Segment E, with only two lanes in each direction and intermittent frontage roads, will reduce traffic now on either I-10 or US 290. Segment E will make it much easier to live in Katy and work in Cypress.

Beltway 8, with up to four or five lanes in each direction, has done a lot to reduce traffic jams. Most of the Beltway 8 frontage roads can carry more traffic than the Grand Parkway's main lanes. If you drive the Grand Parkway south of I-10 during rush hour, you get a pretty good idea of what the new segment will look like when it's developed.

Traffic congestion derives from several different factors, like the number of cars on the road, the number of miles being driven by



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those cars, the speed of traffic, and what time of day people choose to travel. When we build further out, we increase the number of miles people have to travel to get to their jobs—and we have to consider the effects a big increase in gasoline prices could have on people's willingness to drive long distances to their jobs.

The Sierra Club sued the Federal Highway Administration and the Texas Transportation Commission to stop construction on Segment E, arguing that the project would have too great an impact on the environment. They maintain that the lands being used for the project are important for retaining water and helping to control floods. But the judge in the case dismissed the suit, and construction went forward.

There was also some controversy over the funding of the project. In

2009, the Harris County Commissioners Court asked for, and received, \$181 million in stimulus money from the federal government. They intended to use the federal funds to pay for construction costs, but the project wasn't "shovel-ready," and there was a time limit on the availability of the funds. Ultimately, the county spent the stimulus money somewhere else. But any stimulus money the county can capture frees up that amount for use later on, in something else. Texas received about \$376 million in stimulus money for public transportation projects, and \$2.25 billion for surface transportation projects.

Funding has been allocated for each segment of the Grand Parkway, except for Segment A, which is supposed to run from SH 146 to I-45. The GPA describes itself as a "non-profit State Transportation Corporation" whose seven-member board is appointed by TxDOT. The GPA states that a feasibility study for Segment A was completed in 2010 but offers no other projections about when the segment will be built.

Project planners assert that each separate segment is a justifiable project in its own right, apart from the other segments and regardless of whether the other segments are ever completed. Planners point out that many newer suburban communities have poor access to the city's main radial highways. The existing roads in these areas are running at or above capacity now. They also cite high accident rates on the roads near newer, outlying neighborhoods. The Houston region already has

higher overall accident rates than state or national averages. The Parkway will be safer than existing roads in many of the newer outlying neighborhoods because it will be a controlled-access road, with no traffic lights or at-grade intersections. Roads with uncontrolled access, stop signs, or traffic lights all lead to stop-and-go traffic flow, which contributes to higher accident rates. These outlying areas are also expecting some of the highest rates of population growth in the coming years.

## Planning For the Future

People from other states are eager to move to Texas. They love our warm climate, good jobs, low cost of living, and low taxes. The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for Harris and seven other nearby counties. Harris County Judge Ed Emmett is chairman of H-GAC's Transportation Policy Council. According to estimates from H-GAC, Houston is expected to grow to more than 8.5 million people by 2035. Anticipating the best mix of resources to meet Houston's transportation needs more than twenty years into the future is a daunting task. Judge Emmett has stated, in essence, that the object of future road expansions is not necessarily to make our traffic situation better than it is today, but to prevent it from becoming any worse in the future.

The 2035 Houston-Galveston Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), compiled by H-GAC, calls for expenditures of \$86 billion over 25 years. Planners envision more than 160 miles of combined light rail and commuter rail. The plan covers the entire METRO service area, as well as areas like Montgomery and Liberty counties that lie outside of METRO's boundaries.

Since the 2035 RTP was completed in October of 2007, planners have determined that revenues from motor-fuel taxes are going to be less than they first thought. One of the unintended consequences of increasing vehicular fuel efficiency is that money raised from fuel taxes, which are assessed by the gallon, are driven down.

The 2035 RTP predicts that, even after the completion of the improvements recommended in the report, the completed road system will be running

at or above capacity. Planners hope to ease road congestion by expanding bus and rail services, and by including more safe and inviting areas for bicycles and pedestrians. Many METRO buses now have bike racks, which have proven popular with bus riders.

The 2035 RTP also recommends several strategies for managing the demands that will be placed on

Houston's road systems. This includes encouraging people to utilize public transit, creating "transportation management organizations" that will organize carpools, and determining the most efficient travel routes. It also includes getting people to plan their travel during off-peak hours, and, where possible, to telecommute in order to avoid traveling altogether.

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Using real-time traffic information from intelligent transportation systems like Houston TranStar can also help to mitigate traffic congestion. It costs very little for people to access and utilize these systems day to day, once the systems are in place.

There are a number of steps the city can take to improve the traffic situation for some of the outlying communities, short of building the parkway. Indeed, planners considered a “no-build” option. The city can, for instance, build more park-and-ride lots. They can designate more HOV lanes in order to encourage more ride sharing and vanpooling. However, these measures don’t do anything to make the roads safer, increase the capacity, or ease travel between the different arms of Houston’s radial highway system. HOV lanes work better on freeways than on connecting streets with a lot of at-grade intersections, which also lack controlled access.

**New Segments Under Construction**

The next three segments to be built are designated “F-1,” “F-2,” and “G.” The new segments will run between US 290 and US 59, crossing SH 249 and I-45. All three of these segments are scheduled to open in 2015. Segment F-1, running from 290 to 249, will benefit residents in Cypress, Rose Hill, and Hockley. It is supposed to relieve traffic on Mueschke, Grant, and Telge Roads. Studies show that the number of vehicle hours traveled in this segment are expected to increase by 42 percent between 2000 and 2025. Planners assert that the neighborhoods in the F-1 area are expected to grow faster than in almost any other area of the country.

Advocates for the Grand Parkway tout its value in speeding up evacuations. The intersection of the parkway with I-10 is about 10 miles from where they open east-bound lanes to west-bound traffic during hurricanes. That

creates a bottleneck along that ten-mile stretch of I-10. Contraflow lanes on US 290 start after FM 1960, which is inside of the Grand Parkway loop. On I-45, the contraflow lanes begin north of Conroe at SH 336, about 10 miles from the intersection with the Grand Parkway.

**Future Highway Expansions**

Plans are being made to build a toll road from Waller south to Brookshire. The Prairie Parkway Advocacy Group, based in Waller, is making bold plans well ahead of the growth they believe is coming to their area. The Prairie Parkway will be a part of a new highway, 36-A, which is being advocated for by the Highway 36-A Coalition. The proposed 36-A would follow the present 36 to about the Brazos River. From there, it would connect to I-10 and the Prairie Parkway.

The Prairie Parkway would run through the Katy Prairie, an area protected by the Katy Prairie Conservancy. Advocates for the parkway can expect stern opposition from environmental groups, as well as from many local residents. At present, there’s no funding for the project. **N**

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