

1810 Summer Street
Houston, TX 77007

November 14, 2014

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to comment on the prospective Dallas-Houston High Speed Rail project proposed by the Texas Central Railroad. My wife and I are the owners of two historic properties in Houston's First Ward; one serves as our office and design studio, and the other, currently undergoing restoration, will soon become our home.

I would like to start by saying that I am generally supportive of mass transportation and believe that this project, if done carefully and thoughtfully, could be quite beneficial to our region. However, I am deeply troubled by the current state of discussion with regard to the "last mile" in Houston. I understand that a number of alternative locations for the Houston terminus are being considered. However, if a Central Business District terminus is selected, the routes currently under consideration will result in great damage and disruption to urban neighborhoods.

Running the line down the Union Pacific rail track that runs through the Washington Avenue corridor, which I understand is your preferred option, will be highly problematic. The available information indicates that an 80-foot right-of-way is required. The existing right-of-way is much narrower than that; in the First Ward, where it runs right down the middle of Winter Street, it's approximately 24 feet. But acquisition of additional right of way would decimate the properties on either side of Winter Street. I am deeply concerned about the negative impact that the rail line would have on the following features of our neighborhood:

- The High First Ward Historic District. The edge of the district lies half a block from where the proposed line would run.
- Winter Street Studios. This large building, a repurposed former commercial structure, holds dozens of artists' studios and frequently serves as a venue for community events. Its location on Winter Street places it directly in the path of the proposed project.
- The Washington Avenue Arts District, which includes the First and Sixth Wards and through which the proposed line would run, is recognized by the State of Texas as a cultural district. It boasts some 250 creative studios located within a half-mile radius, a concentration believed to be the highest in the state.
- The building boom in Houston has seen many new residences built in the First Ward. Some structures back up to Winter Street; others rely on it for access.

- Looking beyond First Ward, all the neighborhoods along the proposed east-west route inside the 610 Loop, which essentially follows the Washington Avenue corridor, are likewise highly dense and have seen considerable new building and investment in recent years.

Introduction of the infrastructure needed for high-speed rail would cause great harm. The razing of buildings, many of them historic or otherwise significant, that comprise a productive and integral part of the neighborhood would be highly deleterious. The elevated platforms, reportedly 40 to 50 feet high, would disturb the visual integrity of the area and foster an artificial division. And the neighborhood's identity as an arts district and home of a Historic District would be irreparably compromised.

I understand that similar problems also exist with your second-most-preferred alternative, which would have the line run through the heart of the also-heavily-populated Oak Forest area.

Most disturbing of all is the aggressive project schedule and the shameful lack of outreach to affected citizens. Final selection of a route is expected as soon as the first quarter of next year. This does not provide time for all the relevant issues to be researched and considered, nor for meaningful dialogue and cooperation with community stakeholders. In a project where eminent domain is expected to be used to seize homes and property, the overwhelming majority of citizens who would be most affected by this project remain unaware that this process is even taking place.

This is no way to run a railroad. Instead, the Federal Railroad Administration, which is managing the approval process, should look to the recent example set by TxDOT in the planning of the I-45 expansion. The scoping process for that project involved no fewer than four rounds of review over a period of several years, but the time invested was well worth it; the final design, which incorporated feedback from the community and their elected representatives, will be a boon for downtown Houston and is far superior to the alternatives originally proposed.

There are plenty of options to consider. Community leaders have put forward an alternative route that would come down the Hardy Toll Road, where the existing right-of-way is much wider. Another idea, which Texas Central executives have acknowledged as a realistic possibility, would be to run elevated rail over I-10, eliminating the need for additional right-of-way. Coordination with Metro and the City of Houston could also produce solutions involving less-intrusive light-rail connections into downtown.

I hope you will give these creative proposals the careful consideration they deserve. Above all, I urge you to step back and slow the process down so that approaches can be developed for achieving the project's laudable goals without needless damage to Houston's urban neighborhoods.

Sincerely,

Evan Michaelides