

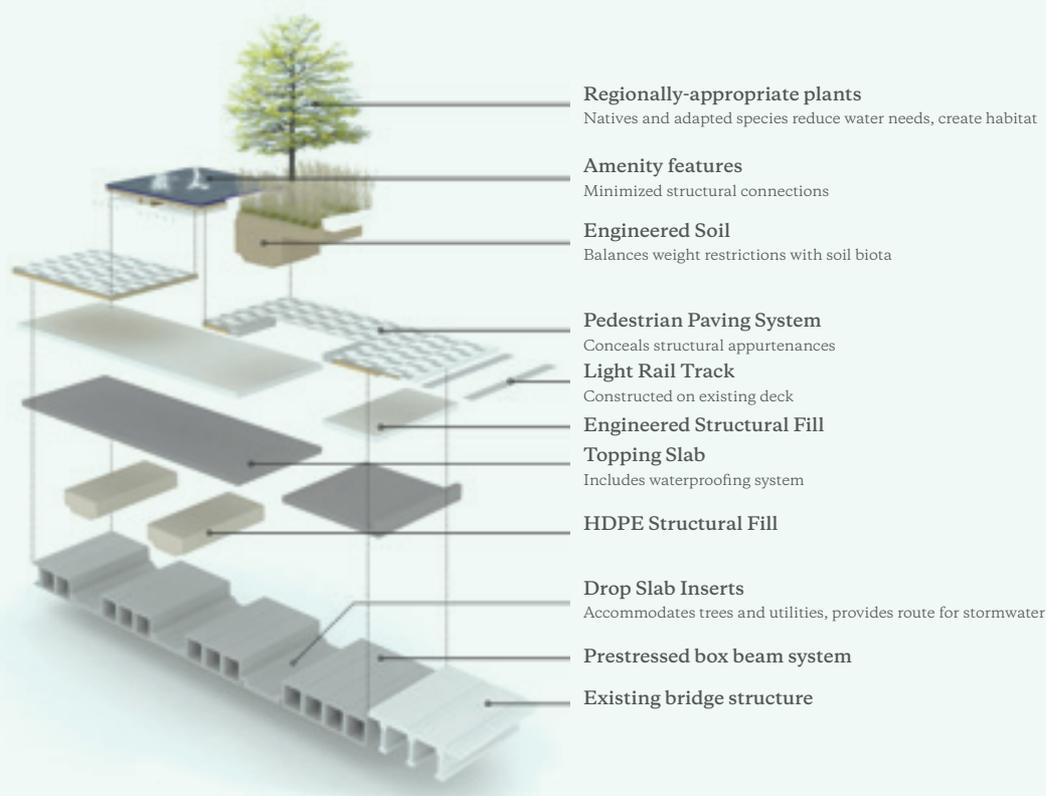
# Will the Urban Highway Reclamation Movement Come to Houston?

by Torie Ludwin

It's not just San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Milwaukee, Saint Louis, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, New York, and Providence anymore. Even Dallas is doing it. Dallas! Cities nationwide are demolishing, rerouting, moving underground, or capping urban highways—reversing the devastating effects of the golden age of the automobile. The results have been outstanding: cleaner air, less noise, better traffic flow, more greenspace, increased walkability, greater property values, and significant economic development.

### Diagram of Klyde Warren Park deck structure over the Woodall Rodgers Freeway

Courtesy Office of James Burnett.



In Dallas, urban planner Patrick Kennedy has mounted a campaign to tear down a section of I-345 currently bifurcating the city and repurpose the space for development and parks. Kennedy's website, [anewdallas.com](http://anewdallas.com), makes a compelling case from economic, traffic, urban planning, public safety, and quality-of-life points of view, using several other successful highway demolitions as potent examples. When the new *Dallas Morning News* architecture critic, Mark Lamster, lauded the proposal, the online version of the article received hundreds of comments and galvanized the effort.

This isn't Dallas' first effort in turning urban thoroughfares into greenspace. The highly successful Klyde Warren Park, completed in 2012, caps 5.2 acres of Woodall Rodgers Freeway and acts as a walkable "bridge" between Downtown and Uptown. Funded through a private-public partnership, it provides a wealth of programming as well as a restaurant, performance stage, jogging trails, a dog park, a playground, fountains and more.

Via capping or rerouting, could Houston reclaim sections of I-45, 59, or 288? Minus a little highway, Houston could have 12 percent less air pollution citywide (as happened in Boston), increased property values (San Francisco), a drop by several degrees in average temperatures (Seoul, Korea), better traffic flow (Portland), more greenspace (everywhere), and greater economic development in the area. Can you imagine it? Dallas can.

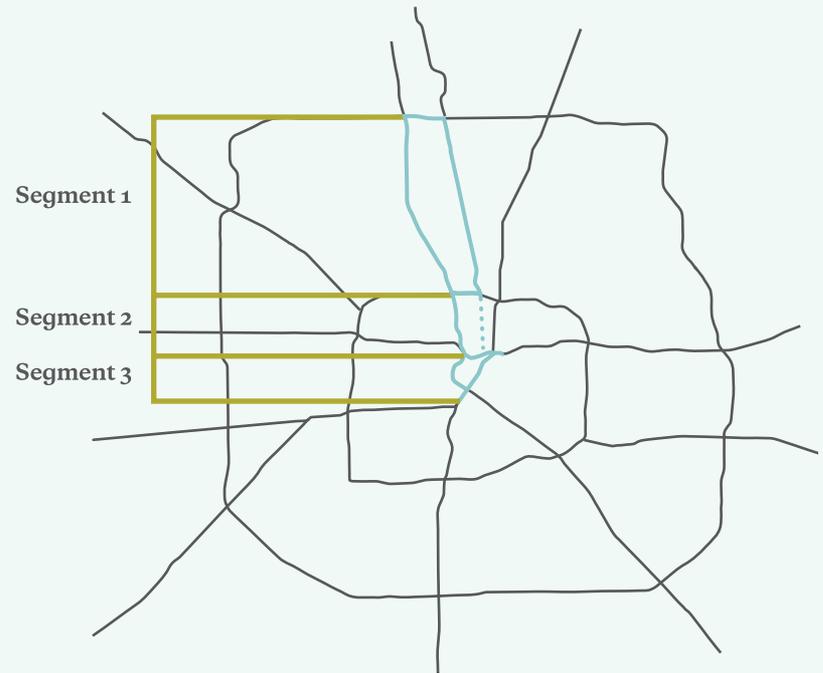
As it turns out, so can the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), along with many Houston residents. According to proposals on the state agency's table, the highway system around Downtown Houston may be subject to a significant transformation. How the highways are changed is of great debate, and it well might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the city to make a radical positive change downtown.

The goal of the North Houston Highway Improvement Project, in the works for more than 10 years, is to reduce traffic along I-45 between Beltway 8 North and its intersections with Highways 59 and 288 in Downtown Houston. It divides I-45 into three segments: Beltway 8 to 610, 610 to I-10, and I-10 to I-45's intersection with 59 and 288, including the Pierce Elevated.

The expansion of I-45 has been a concern for state, federal, and local agencies for several years not only because of current traffic congestion and high rate of accidents, but also expected area population growth, aging infrastructure, and unmet safety standards.

TxDOT and 20 federal, state, and local agencies, including the City of Houston Public Works and Engineering Department, the Houston Downtown Management District, and the East Downtown Management District have been assembled to weigh in on the transformation of I-45 to accommodate Houston's incredible growth and the traffic that comes with it.

On November 14 and 19, 2013, TxDOT held its third set of annual, public meetings about the North Houston Highway Improvement Project, where it presented three possible alternatives for each segment of I-45. As federally mandated, TxDOT chose the alternatives from the several it presented in its public meetings one year earlier.



**TOP** Segments in North Houston Highway Improvement Project  
**RIGHT** Woodall Rodgers Freeway in Dallas before Klyde Warren Park  
**LEFT** Freeway after Klyde Warren Park



The alternatives for segments one and two involve different ways to widen I-45 or stack new lanes, raising concerns about noise and air pollution. Two of the three alternatives for segment three through Downtown involve removing, partially or fully, the Pierce Elevated, which generally has slow speeds and divides Downtown from Fourth Ward and Midtown. Its removal could signal a fluid re-integration between Downtown and its immediate neighbors.

However, the alternatives also propose widening 59 to the width of a football field along its north-south stretch behind the George R. Brown Convention Center to accommodate the realignment of I-45. With new public transit, the BBVA Compass stadium, more commercial enterprise, and its prime location near Downtown, the area of East Downtown is experiencing a renaissance. A massive elevated highway could negatively impact East Downtown's growth as well as serve as an ever-widening barrier between the two parts of Houston.

After the 2013 public meetings, area residents voiced their deep concern about the impact of a greatly expanded elevated highway merging 59 and I-45 on the surrounding neighborhoods. Because TxDOT is early in its planning and no budget has been set for this project, the agency can be especially responsive to community involvement and public comment. Receiving and responding to community feedback is part of the federally mandated NEPA process; now is the time when involvement from both residents and business can influence the direction of how Houston's downtown highways are transformed.

As the Department of Transportation follows through on its federally required processes to propose and examine alternatives to the expansion of I-45, it's winnowing the options quickly and public comments can have an impact. It holds meetings about once a year to take comments from the city's residents and businesses. At Public Meeting #4 TxDOT will present the preferred alternative chosen from the three alternatives for each segment, as presented at the 2013 Public Meeting #3. 

To voice your concerns about or support for the reshaping and redevelopment of Houston's highway system, with the attendant impacts and benefits for our city's neighborhoods, please visit [ih45northandmore.com](http://ih45northandmore.com).



Memorial Park Master Plan

A new master plan for Memorial Park by Thomas Woltz of Nelson Byrd Woltz proposes a grass- and tree-covered land bridge, 800 feet long, that would rise across Memorial Drive, over a tunnel, to reconnect the park's north and south sides. Are such land bridges a new trend as Houston attempts to maintain or expand its car-oriented infrastructure while also aspiring to a more pedestrian-friendly urbanism?

