

# Property owners in limbo as freeway project looms

\$6B plan could impact hundreds of properties

By Nancy Sarnoff | August 28, 2015

After nearly two years smoking meat out of a trailer on the sweltering parking lots of inner-loop bars and ice houses, Wesley Jurena decided to give his full-time passion a permanent home with a brick-and-mortar location to serve his brisket, ribs and sausage, acclaimed by local barbecue aficionados, to the hip masses in EaDo, a resurging urban neighborhood on the fringe of downtown Houston.

But when he signed a three-year lease over the summer to take space in a small strip center next to the stretch of U.S. 59 that separates the city's skyscraper district from the trendy area east of downtown, Jurena wasn't aware of a sweeping plan to rebuild and expand the freeway that threatened to take his building and others potentially in the way of the massive transit project.

"I've just spent a lot of money building out a restaurant," Jurena said after he was told about the proposal. He plans to open his new restaurant, Pappa Charlie's Barbeque in mid-September. But come the end of his lease - or possibly before then - he may be looking for a new home.



Wesley Jurena poses for a portrait Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2015, in Houston. He is opening his first brick-and-mortar Pappa Charlie's Barbeque, 2012 Rusk, just east of downtown. He's leasing space in a strip center that could be acquired and demolished by TxDOT for a massive highway rebuilding project, a portion of which calls for removing the Pierce Elevated and realigning I-45 to be parallel to Interstate 10 and U.S. 59 near downtown ( Steve Gonzales / Houston Chronicle)

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### *\$6B, years to complete*

The massive freeway project, which is still being planned and has not yet been funded, could impact hundreds of properties along the 16-mile route planned by the Texas Department of Transportation to ease congestion along Interstate 45 and offer opportunities to create park-like green space and bike trails alongside parts of it.

“Overall, a highway project is a positive for the entire community,” said property valuation consultant Mark Sikes. “Unfortunately, it negatively impacts a lot of properties and individuals.”

Some have a lot to lose.

The owner of a 375-unit upscale multifamily complex stands to have a third of its apartments taken for the project. And a nearly century-old building that just this week received a designation from city preservation officials as a protected historic landmark appears to be around the edge of the project’s proposed right of way.

Unveiled by the Texas Department of Transportation earlier this year, the freeway project proposes to add managed lanes to Interstate 45 from the Sam Houston Tollway in north Houston to U.S. 59 south of downtown. Additionally, plans call for removing the Pierce Elevated and realigning I-45 to be parallel to U.S. 59 east of the George R. Brown Convention Center. It is expected to cost more than \$6 billion and take years to complete.

Some freeway segments have been designed as depressed roadways with local street traffic flowing above them. Plans show green space above the freeways east of the convention center and between Cavalcade and Quitman streets.

TxDOT is still in the analysis and environmental impact assessment phases of the project and its plans are subject to change. Spokesman Danny Perez said it would not begin acquiring property until TxDOT had “officially determined the recommended alternative, completed the environmental impact review and have a record of decision.”

“We are working toward getting environmental clearance in 2017,” Perez said in an email. “The date of clearance would be the earliest we could start acquiring right of way.”

### *‘Proposed right of way’*

A map on the website outlining the project, known as the North Houston Highway Improvement Project, shows a “proposed right of way” line running through the properties potentially at risk.

Louis Macey, whose family has owned real estate east of downtown for years, expects to lose two blocks through condemnation.

“I’ve got real mixed emotions,” Macey said. “I want the development, but I don’t want to lose the land.”

He has seen TxDOT's plans and said a park-like green space conceptualized near the convention center over a below-ground-level freeway would be a positive step toward beautifying the area.

"Their design will help expand downtown Houston to the east and will give our convention visitors a much better view of what Houston's all about," Macey said.

David Denenburg recently bought the historic red brick building, a sliver of which is behind the red line on the map, and he's already started restoring the five-story structure at the corner of Preston and St. Emanuel.

David Bush, acting executive director of Preservation Houston, said federal and state projects take precedence over local historic designations.

"We feel confident we can work around a matter of a few feet to save one of Houston's historic buildings still standing," said Denenburg, who owns the property with other investors.

Another block within the proposed right of way contains a large apartment building, one of three structures that make up the Lofts at the Ballpark complex.

### ***Questioning 'reality'***

Stacy Hunt of Greystar, which manages the property, said the project appears to be a long way off, but the owner of the complex, a pension fund adviser out of Boston, is aware of the possible repercussions.

"The people we represent are very concerned," Hunt said.

An official from the EaDo neighborhood said many area stakeholders are supportive of the general concept of depressing the freeway adjacent to them and being better connected to downtown.

"There's more questioning the reality of it all just because it seems so big and sort of visionary," said Anton Sinkewich, executive director of the East Downtown Management District.

"For now, many property owners and tenants in the right of way are functioning as business as usual," Sinkewich said. And if the project does come to fruition, many will be "OK with essentially being bought out by TxDOT."

