



The Benefits, And Costs, Of Unsnarling Highway 290

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If you take US 290 to work, chances are you're listening to this while stuck in traffic. TxDOT is now engaged in a multi-billion-dollar construction project to widen the highway. But that's coming at a heavy cost to businesses along the route.

It's taken more than a dozen years to get the bulldozers rolling. But thanks to a cost sharing agreement with Harris County, TxDOT is now on course to have the entire US 290 project under construction within two years.

Computer animation shows how HWY 290 is expected to look after the completion of \$1.8 billion project. Video shot by Gail Delaughter on September 26, 2012.

"From I-610 to State Highway 6, all of that will be under construction by the year 2014 and completed in 2016."

Karen Othon is a spokesperson for TxDOT. She says about a quarter of a million people use the US 290 corridor every day, making it one of the most congested roadways in the state.

"I believe right now it's an estimated 535,000 people live along the US 290 corridor ... and by the year 2035, that estimates going to be over 880,000."

The agency estimates that last year, Texas drivers spent more than 3 million hours stuck in traffic along the corridor, at a cost to drivers of nearly a \$100 million.

Widening the roadway will make life easier for those commuters, as well as their employers. But for those businesses in the way of construction, it's a different story. The state is taking their land under eminent domain.

"You've got everything from car dealerships to fast food restaurants, retail shopping centers, hotels, apartment buildings, light industrial warehouses ..."

That's Mark Sikes of Houston-based real estate valuation firm Deal, Sikes & Associates. He and partner Matthew Deal are working with property owners to get them enough compensation to relocate. In many cases, he says, that's not what the state is offering.

"The offers by the state are just low. They don't reflect market value and market conditions as of today."

For some businesses, even getting an offer is proving a struggle. Larry Wicker is operations manager for Phobia. The haunted house complex has been at its current location along US 290 just outside the beltway for a dozen years. The state plans to turn the property into a drainage ditch.

“It’s easy to find land if you have the money. We have no idea when we’re going to get paid or even what the number is. I’m pretty sure that they’re going to come at us very low, because they spent no time doing the appraisal.”

Phobia and other businesses are hoping to get better offers by bringing in appraisers of their own — and in some cases, by suing. But as Mark Sikes’ partner Matthew Deal says, sooner or later, the road is going to go through.

“The congestion is unbearable. It has to be done. That roadway needs to be widened. Just like I-10 was a disaster before it was widened. Some people just get hurt. It happens.”

To listen to the audio of this radio broadcast or watch a video showing how Highway 290 is expected to look after completion, **[click here](#)**.