



## **WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE MOPAC SOUTH ENVIRONMENTAL STUDY**

### **WHY DO WE NEED TO IMPROVE MOPAC SOUTH?**

MoPac Expressway south of Cesar Chavez Street is a vital transportation artery for Austin. Constructed between 1973 and 2013 as a four to six lane divided highway, this section of MoPac attracts up to 130,000 cars and trucks per day. Over time, growth in the corridor - residential, retail and commercial - has led to increased congestion and reduced mobility.

In southern Travis and northern Hays counties, the population is projected to grow by 61 percent and employment is projected to grow by 74 percent by 2035.

If nothing is done, it could take an additional half hour to drive between Cesar Chavez Street and Slaughter Lane in 2035.

### **WHAT IS THE MOPAC SOUTH ENVIRONMENTAL STUDY?**

The MoPac South Environmental Study is thoroughly analyzing the MoPac Expressway from Cesar Chavez Street to Slaughter Lane to determine the best alternatives for improving mobility. The result will be documented in an Environmental Assessment that will consider "build" and "no build" options, as well as traffic management strategies. Over the course of the study, a full range of alternatives will be developed that will take into account the needs of drivers, transit riders, bicyclists and pedestrians as well as surrounding businesses, neighborhoods and the environment. Through extensive analysis of the engineering feasibility, social, economic and environmental impacts of each alternative, as well as consideration of public input, the study team will recommend a solution. The Study began in 2013 and is anticipated to be completed in 2016.

### **WHO IS CONDUCTING THE MOPAC SOUTH ENVIRONMENTAL STUDY?**

The Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (Mobility Authority) and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) are developing the MoPac South Environmental Study cooperatively with local partners.

## WHAT IS BEING PROPOSED?

The project team is recommending the addition of two new Express Lanes in each direction from Cesar Chavez Street to Slaughter Lane. Express Lanes are special separated lanes that are designed to remain congestion free. They utilize variable toll pricing to manage the amount of traffic in the lanes. This is accomplished by increasing the toll when traffic is heavy and lowering it when traffic is light. Variable toll pricing is intended to keep traffic in the Express Lanes free flowing, giving public transit buses, vanpools, emergency response vehicles and drivers who choose to use the Express Lanes a faster and more reliable trip.

The current concept includes a one-lane entrance and a one-lane exit ramp from the Express Lanes to Cesar Chavez Street approximately 25 feet above the existing MoPac bridges. The height of this ramp would be lower than two existing structures at the interchange. The project team proposed going over the three existing general purpose lanes because they felt it would be less impactful. Going under could potentially impact the Hike and Bike Trail. It would also be more intrusive for people who are enjoying Zilker Park and Lady Bird Lake. Another option would be to further widen the existing bridges but that would require going outside of TxDOT's right-of-way, potentially affecting Zilker Park.

Comments from our public input process has let us know that we need to take a harder look at this area. We are currently evaluating additional concepts for moving vehicles on and off of Cesar Chavez Street.

## WHY TWO EXPRESS LANES INSTEAD OF ONE?

Two Express Lanes work better than one lane in each direction for several reasons:

**Reliability:** Constructing only one lane in each direction makes it more likely that vehicles in the lane experience disruptions in reliability. Minor incidents, even a flat tire, could easily disrupt the flow of traffic and speed in the Express Lane. Additionally, drivers who choose to travel at slow speeds in the Express Lane would impact the travel time reliability of all trailing vehicles.

**Incident management:** Constructing two lanes in each direction provides the additional capacity needed to enable a faster and easier response to incidents in the corridor.

**Access:** With two lanes in each direction, one is available to support entering and exiting traffic and one lane can support through traffic. A project with only one lane in each direction is much more likely to experience disruptions in the traffic flow.

## WON'T THESE EXTRA LANES JUST ADD MORE TRAFFIC TO CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL ENTRY POINT?

The option of a having a reliable trip time to and from downtown is expected to attract some additional vehicles. However, Express Lanes, with variably priced tolls, are designed to limit access to the lanes, not add more traffic. It is important to understand how vehicles entering and exiting the Express Lanes will impact Cesar Chavez Street and all of the downtown area. In partnership with the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Texas, the Mobility Authority is studying potential traffic and safety impacts to Cesar Chavez Street and around Austin High School. This information will be shared with the community, City of Austin transportation planners, and Austin High faculty, staff, parents and students before a final design is approved.

## **THIS PROJECT SEEMS TO BE MOVING QUICKLY. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY?**

This project is still very much in process. Nothing has been decided, and the study is not expected to conclude until early 2016. The Mobility Authority has a robust public involvement process. In addition to hosting three project Open Houses, the MoPac South Environmental Study team conducted or presented at more than 40 meetings and community events since the study began in 2013. However, we understand that some community leaders and citizens are not yet familiar with the certain aspects of the project. That's why we have extended the study's timeline and added an additional Open House that will be held late this summer. In the time prior to that meeting, project engineers and designers will carefully consider the feedback we have received and come back to the community with responses and additional concepts for public review.

## **ISN'T THIS PROJECT PART OF AN OUTER LOOP INTENDED TO EVENTUALLY CONNECT VEHICLES TO IH-35 AND AREN'T YOU STUDYING IT IN ISOLATION FROM OTHER PROJECTS SUCH AS SH 45SW?**

The MoPac South Environmental Study is not part of an outer "loop" project to connect to the proposed SH 45SW project. Improvements being considered for MoPac South have "independent utility," as specified by National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)\* requirements, meaning improvements would benefit drivers and would be considered a reasonable expenditure, even if no additional transportation improvements in the area are made.

## **WHY CAN'T WE BUILD GENERAL PURPOSE LANES INSTEAD OF EXPRESS LANES?**

Even if public funding (taxpayer dollars) were available to construct general-purpose (non-tolled) lanes, latent traffic demand would quickly fill these lanes, and they would become congested like the existing general-purpose lanes on MoPac. The approach to solving congestion by simply adding multiple lanes is not sustainable and has not proven to be effective in managing traffic and promoting transit. Express Lanes are able to manage congestion rather than just patch the problem temporarily.

## **ARE EXPRESS LANES REALLY JUST "LEXUS LANES?"**

Express Lanes provide a better commute experience even for those drivers who choose not to utilize them. They free up capacity in the general-purpose lanes, relieving congestion for drivers who do not wish to pay a toll. Studies indicate people of all income levels use them and value the choice afforded to them. \*\* Lower income individuals have the least amount of flexibility in their schedules, and as such, benefit from the option to bypass congestion under certain circumstances.

## **HOW MUCH WILL THE TOLLS COST?**

A traffic and revenue study will be completed to determine the potential range of variably priced Express Lane tolls for the MoPac South Project, but it is expected that the initial toll rates will be similar to what is anticipated for the North MoPaced Express Lanes currently under construction. Those tolls could range from \$0.25 to \$4.00 per trip, but could be higher if demand is greater than anticipated.

\* NEPA Documentation

<http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/projdev/docueis.asp>

\*\*US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration

<http://www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov/congestionpricing/resources/lwincequityrpi/>