



March 21, 2023

Yuhayna H. Mahmud
System and Capital Planning
Planning, Engineering and Construction
Metro Transit Authority of Harris County
1900 Main Street, 11th Floor
Houston, Texas 77002

RE: Eastwood Civic Association does not support current design for METRORapid University Corridor, Segment 4

Ms. Mahmud,

I write to you as President of the Eastwood Civic Association, which represents over 2,400 homes in 19 subdivisions, including the historic communities of Eastwood, Broadmoor and Jackson Court. Many of these subdivisions are in proximity to Segment 4 of the METRORapid University Corridor that is proposed to travel Lockwood Drive from the Eastwood Transit Center to Fifth Ward/Denver Harbor Transit Center.

The Eastwood Civic Association is deeply disappointed with METRO's current design of the project, which has failed to address most of the seven conditions we presented as public comments in a letter dated July 13, 2022. We are also concerned with the nature of community engagement to date, in particular failure to release project renderings until after the Segment 4 community meetings had passed. Now in phase three of public engagement, I want to reiterate our unchanged position on this project: **we will not support this project unless these seven conditions are met.**

1. **No overpass.** I will restate this more clearly: **no overpass of any kind running along Lockwood** and bisecting our vibrant neighborhood. The bus-only overpass, currently proposed to start elevating at McKinney and coming back to grade near Canal, is untenable for the neighborhood. The neighborhood's memories of the Green Line construction and overpass on Harrisburg are painful. Six years after construction, there is no vibrancy underneath the Harrisburg overpass. We cannot accept anything resembling that structure in our historic neighborhood.

When we first wrote to METRO in July 2022, we requested "that METRO **present alternative design options** for grade-separation at the Union Pacific Rail Line between Harrisburg and Rusk" and noted that we were "optimistic that an underpass — similar in size and scale to the one located on Polk at Milby — could be a reasonable alternative for the neighborhood."



Though METRO undertook an analysis of an underpass, METRO failed to present it as a choice to the neighborhood or seek meaningful feedback on this alternative. The only materials we have seen of the analysis is the flood heat map. We have submitted an Open Records request for more information, and implore METRO to share engineering details so our community members can provide thoughtful feedback on this alternative.

Furthermore, the neighborhood also stated that we were open to “hearing alternative designs that more broadly address the issues the freight line poses to our neighborhood” — yet no additional alternatives have been presented. Notably, alternative route alignments were not presented to community members until the last public meeting of Segment 4, held at the HCC Felix Fraga Campus on March 8, 2023. The alignments, as presented, show Lockwood was chosen because it had the lowest percent industrial impact, whereas the Segment 3 criteria was the lowest percent of residential impact. We question this change in criteria between segments. Although Lockwood is the straightest route from Eastwood Transit Center to Denver Harbor Transit Center, there may be alternatives that will better serve high and medium density and commercial developments in adjacent areas.

At this stage, our neighborhood is solution-agnostic on how our demand for no overpass is achieved. Although we’ve provided suggestions, METRO has the financial, human and technical resources to investigate what is possible and we demand that your organization does so and then engages meaningfully with the community to discuss what would be acceptable. We know it’s possible for METRO to undertake substantive analysis of alternatives, because we’ve seen it done with the Wheeler Transit Center where three concept options were presented in March 2022: Elevated, At-Grade (with below grade BRT), and Transit Mall. Our neighborhood is a valuable part of Houston, and deserves to have alternatives analyzed and meaningfully discussed with the community.

- 2. Protect existing esplanade.** As you travel through Greater Eastwood on Lockwood Drive, large old growth oaks on a wide esplanade greet you, welcoming you to this place that we call home. The esplanade is a critical feature to the neighborhood’s character and natural environment, and it must be maintained and enhanced by this project. In the current design, METRO demolishes all of the esplanade, from Polk to Harrisburg, which would mean the loss of 21 old growth trees, and 27 younger trees donated to the neighborhood by Minute Maid in 2006. In a City filled with concrete, areas of green space and mature tree canopy are priceless, and should be protected as invaluable assets—not torn down for more impermeable surfaces and structures.



3. **Prioritize a road diet to accommodate BRT lanes.** Recognizing that our request to protect the existing esplanade means a trade-off, we've advocated for a road diet to provide the necessary BRT lanes. Lockwood is a wide road, and rarely experiences traffic back-ups due to volume; thus, we believe there is plenty of general lane capacity to accommodate this diet now and in the future. We recognize that this will result in slower traffic through our neighborhood, but as an area predominantly of residential use, we see this as a benefit that could improve safety and walkability. Although METRO's current design reduces general traffic lanes, **it does so without the benefit of protecting the esplanade, we believe this must be reevaluated.**
4. **Complete project within the existing Right of Way.** Given the width of Lockwood, we still believe this project can be completed within the existing City of Houston right of way. We urge METRO to complete this project without the acquisition of land from property owners, especially through eminent domain. We are disappointed to hear conflicting information regarding this condition. We've been told verbally that METRO did not expect property acquisition in our segment, but now see areas on project design maps that indicate the possibility of acquisition. The lack of clarity on this issue is unacceptable and the community is deeply concerned that the project design will be approved before those property owners are even aware of their ability to weigh in on design options.
5. **Addition of multi-use path.** As a part of the rebuild of Lockwood for this project, we urged METRO to consider the inclusion of two 10' wide multi-use paths for people who walk, bike or roll. The existing sidewalks along Lockwood are in poor condition and they do not offer an accessible experience. An addition of a multi-use path will improve last-mile connection and access through the neighborhood to METRO's existing and new transit services. In the current design, this condition appears to be mostly met, with 10' wide multi-use sidewalks shown in most areas, shrinking to 6' where right-of-way limitations appear make it more challenging to provide 10' sidewalks. We are encouraged by this, and hope this condition will continue to be met in future designs.
6. **Maintain regular pedestrian access.** In our initial letter, we urged METRO to protect pedestrian access across Lockwood at least every 500'. The current design does this but with one very upsetting exception: Park Drive.

Park Drive is a critical community corridor for our neighborhood, every day there are families walking with their spouses, children or pets across Lockwood at this intersection. The BRT design as proposed bisects and cuts off City of Houston Park space for the Park Drive Esplanade, therefore the



absence of a pedestrian crossing at this intersection limits the usability of an important, well-used community asset. This must be corrected in the project design, and the fact that a pedestrian crossing at Park Drive is not included in the current design leaves us with the impression that the project team failed to walk the community to understand the impacts of the proposed design.

7. **Softscape.** It is critical that this project matches and enhances the existing character of the neighborhood. To do this we would encourage softscaping where existing City right-of-way allows (i.e., esplanade, boulevard, micro-parks at Rusk and Walker streets) and that any structures (e.g., underpasses and transit stops) are decorated with unique, visual components (e.g., public art). Together this will help ensure this project fits with, and serves to improve, the natural characteristics of Eastwood as a historic, tree-filled, vibrant, residential neighborhood.

On this item, we recognize that this early in the design it is difficult to understand the particulars of softscaping that this project allows. However, meaningful community engagement around what could be done to soften the landscape around this project has not occurred yet, and we are fearful that appropriate funds will not be allocated for this critical work. We urge METRO to identify specific priority areas for this work, and identify funding needs from the onset with engagement from the community.

In addition to our conditions of support, I want to formally document our concerns about METRO's community engagement efforts to date. In Greater Eastwood:

- Materials were not released to the community in advance of meetings despite numerous requests by community members. This has meant that community members were unable to develop informed opinions about the project, and prepare meaningful questions for project engineers during the public meetings. This concern was raised during phase two of public engagement, but was not addressed in future phases.
- Mailers promoting this public engagement were only circulated in English. This neighborhood is 72% Hispanic, with 63% of households speaking Spanish at home. In a neighborhood of this demographic makeup, effective spanish outreach is essential to adequately reach the community.
- Outreach materials make no mention of the overpass structure planned for the project. Whether by omission or by design, the lack of this key detail in outreach materials fails to adequately inform residents of the impact and scope of the project under development.


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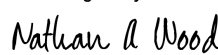
- On March 15, 2023, the District I Councilperson, Robert Gallegos, told our committee that METRO had informed his office that Eastwood is in favor of an overpass. The Eastwood Civic Associations position on this project has been stated verbally and in writing since July 13, 2022 that we would not support the project if it included an overpass.
- There is not adequate time between the scheduled public engagement activities and the deadline for project staff to present a Locally Preferred Alternative for any meaningful changes to be incorporated into the design based on community impact. This leaves residents feeling like community engagement has not been done in good faith, and that their concerns will not be heard.

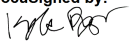
In summary, we implore METRO to reconsider design plans which have yet to satisfy the desires of customers and residents METRO is obligated to serve. To date, METRO has not fulfilled its commitments to properly engage residents of available construction options, to inform residents of construction scale and scope, or to offer alternative designs. The project route and design through Segment 4, as presented, is untenable. We encourage METRO to speak with our residents in detail on these issues, and to consider presenting alternative designs before adopting a permanent route choice and voting on a Locally Preferred Alternative. At this time, we urge all Board Members to delay voting on the Locally Preferred Alternative and direct staff to look for alternatives to an overpass and meaningfully engage with community members on an alternative design.

Our seven conditions are not unreasonable; incorporating them into METRO's design will improve the project and increase community buy-in for a \$1.5 billion investment. When we started this process, we could see the value that the planned METRORapid University Corridor would provide to improve transit connectivity within our community, but right now METRO is ignoring the community members that this project is intended to serve.

Regards,

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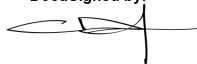
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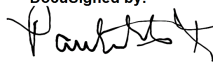
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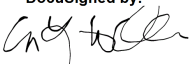
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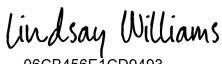
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