

TRAFFIC & TRANSIT | OBITUARIES | EDITORIALS | WEATHER | LOTTERY

EDITORIAL

Instead of yet another overpass, how about ...

Let's not remake the same mistake with Elysian Viaduct

By **RAMONA DAVIS**
and **RICK WALTON**

In the past 20 years, Houston has made incredible progress toward its goal of reinvigorating the central business district. The recently unveiled Houston Downtown Development Framework, sponsored by Central Houston, Downtown District, Houston Downtown Alliance and Main Street Market Square Redevelopment Authority, offers an exciting vision for the evolution of the city center over the next two decades. The plan also extends revitalization efforts to previously neglected neighborhoods adjacent to downtown.

The Greater Houston Preservation Alliance would like to call attention to one aspect of the proposal that would both remedy an unfortunate situation that has existed for 50 years and provide a vibrant gateway to central

Houston. The Downtown Development Framework calls for the creation of an at-grade Elysian Boulevard to replace the existing Elysian Viaduct. The new thoroughfare would provide secondary access to the Hardy Toll Road extension along with connections to historic neighborhoods and new development in the Near North Side and Fifth Ward as well as the new Waterview District along Buffalo Bayou.

On Dec. 7, the Texas Department of Transportation is holding a public meeting from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Sherman Elementary School, 1909 McKee St., regarding the proposed reconstruction of the Elysian



BYPASSED: A handful of houses in one of city's oldest neighborhoods sit virtually underneath the Elysian Viaduct, an overpass that begins at one point just north of Minute Maid Park.

Viaduct. Although the viaduct is a relatively small component of the highway projects planned for the Houston area, it will play a critical role in the success of proposed developments along Buffalo Bayou and neighborhood

revitalization efforts north of downtown.

Many Houstonians do not know the Elysian Viaduct exists. The foot of the overpass, located north of Minute Maid Park, is not

clearly marked and the bridge is not heavily used. In 1954, the city of Houston and Harris County cooperated to construct the viaduct to connect the business district with the Near North Side. Instead of purchasing property along the route, local government built the viaduct over the Elysian Street right of way, hastening the demise of one of Houston's oldest residential neighborhoods. A half-century later, the handful of remaining residents are still living in houses that are virtually underneath the overpass.

Rather than learning from past mistakes, TxDOT and the Harris County Toll Road Authority now plan to compound the error by widening and extending the viaduct and constructing flyovers connecting the new overpass to the proposed Hardy Toll Road extension.

While we recognize the compelling need to complete the toll road extension and the primary, high-speed connectors to the I-10/U.S. 59 interchange, we are asking state and county officials to consider an alternative to their standard way of doing things when constructing the secondary connector along Elysian Street. Rather than replacing the existing viaduct with an even larger overpass, we strongly encourage TxDOT and the Toll Road Authority to heed the Downtown Development Framework's call for an at-grade Elysian Boulevard. The proposed thoroughfare offers unique opportunities to enhance revitalization efforts in a largely intact historic neighborhood and development along the course of Buffalo Bayou, one of our most important natural resources.

The proposed Elysian Boulevard would stimulate rather than stifle revitalization in the Near North Side. Although little-known to most Houstonians, this area is comparable to the Heights or Old Sixth Ward of 15 or 20 years ago. Blocks of houses built in the 1880s and 1890s that would be sacrificed to the viaduct and flyovers could provide homeownership opportunities in an economically and ethnically diverse urban setting. Investment encouraged by Elysian Boulevard would also provide significant additions to city and county tax bases, while an expanded overpass would take a large number of properties off the tax rolls.

The rebuilt viaduct would not just impact

historic properties. The overpass would cut off access from the east to Hardy Village, the new mixed-use development being built on the former Hardy rail yards. The recently renovated Houston Foundry complex of commercial artists' studios also lies in the path of the widened viaduct.

Elysian Boulevard, on the other hand, would enhance rather than ignore Buffalo Bayou's amenities. Removal of the Elysian Viaduct and improvement of the McKee Street Bridge are important parts of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's Master Plan. Viaduct removal is one of the priority proposals designed to refocus development along the bayou and provide access to new waterfront destinations.

During this year's Super Bowl, limousine and taxi drivers were instructed to take visitors downtown via the Hardy Toll Road to avoid what many perceive as the ugliness of the North Freeway. As currently planned, the toll road extension via a rebuilt Elysian Viaduct will do nothing to address this issue. For less money than the cost of the overpass, we could build a landscaped parkway that passes through a vibrant, historic neighborhood before crossing the recreational amenities and green space along Buffalo Bayou with Houston's signature skyline in the background. Beyond the pride Houstonians would feel bringing out-of-town guests into the city on this thoroughfare, imagine the simple satisfaction of driving such a beautiful route to work every day.

The Near North Side is entering an era of incredible challenge and change. The work we do today will impact the success of redevelopment, revitalization and beautification efforts on both the north and east sides for decades to come. Faced with this exceptional opportunity, TxDOT and the Toll Road Authority persist in doing things the same old way. The Hardy Toll Road extension could provide an impressive gateway to a revitalized downtown Houston. As it now stands, we are getting just another overpass.

Davis is executive director of Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. Walton is president of the Board of Directors of Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.