



Joint Transportation Committee Hearing
February 1, 2010
8:00 a.m.

Public Testimony - Maureen Crocker

Good day. My name is Maureen Crocker. I am the Interim Executive Director of the Gulf Coast Rail District (GCRD). The Gulf Coast Rail District was created in 2007 by Harris County, Fort Bend County, and the City of Houston to foster regional rail enhancements. Last year, Galveston County and Waller County joined the District. The Port of Houston Authority is an original member and Texas Transportation Commissioner Ned Holmes holds an ex officio seat on the Rail District Board of Directors to ensure close coordination with TxDOT.

These regional governments joined efforts through the Gulf Coast Rail District based on recognition of several factors.

- The Houston region has an extensive rail network that has served as the basis for the region's growth from its earliest days and could serve to foster its ongoing growth in a cost effective, environmentally friendly way.
- The rail network crosses geographic and political boundaries. The unified input and financial resources of communities must be leveraged with the rail owners to gain cooperation of the rail owners and cost-sharing.
- The Houston region's growth around the rail network has created safety, mobility and quality of life conflicts.
- Over 900 Houston region shippers rely on the rail network. Current congestion levels on the regional rail network significantly impact rail and shipper operations thus limiting potential for economic development.
- Continued regional residential growth will be strongest in areas outside of Houston's Beltway 8 while existing job centers inside the City of Houston will remain strong and grow. Commutes will be longer distance and longer duration as roadway congestion also grows. Commuter rail is a viable alternative and must be supported by the entire region that will benefit.

Several studies led local leaders to these conclusions. Two serve as the basis for initial GCRD planning efforts.

TxDOT completed the Houston Region Freight Study in 2007. The study included a thorough review of the region's rail network and recommendations for \$3.4 billion worth of projects that should be initiated to address current bottlenecks. Completion of the recommended improvements will enable more reliable freight rail shipments. The resulting fluidity in rail operations will facilitate the initiation of commuter and passenger rail.

As TxDOT was completing its freight rail analysis, the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) was finalizing a Regional Commuter Rail Connectivity Study. The H-GAC study proposed a Baseline System within existing freight rail right-of-way. The start-up cost for the proposed Baseline System is estimated to be \$3.1 billion.

Over the next 15 years, the Houston region needs \$6.5 billion solely for rail projects to address forecasted freight and population growth. Without these types of projects, the national economic engine that is the State of Texas will lose horsepower.

- The Houston-Galveston Area Council 2035 Long Range Transportation Plan states that the region currently loses \$23.1 million per day due to congestion. The 2035 LRP anticipates an additional 3 million residents and a doubling of freight traffic. Stalled traffic will stall growth.
- Current congestion on the Houston region rail network costs local shippers \$428 million each year. That cost will increase as container volumes increase further congesting the network. Shipping companies will not expand and add jobs.
- More than 186,000 Houston region motorists are delayed each day at one or more of the 1200 grade crossings included in the Houston Region Freight Study. This results in almost 2 million unproductive hours per year and 584 tons of additional emissions per year. Over a 10 year period, the total public cost of delay at these Houston region grade crossings is estimated to be \$907 million. Extending the analysis period to 20 years generates a total public cost of over \$3.6 billion.

The public costs will increase each year. With right-of-way acquisition and other infrastructure costs in an urban environment, the construction costs will increase each year also. The time to address this problem is now.