

CHAPTER 1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

This chapter describes the proposed action, location, purpose and need for the proposed undertaking by the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO).

1.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed project, known as the Intermodal Terminal (IT), is located within the City of Houston in Harris County, Texas. It involves the development of a multi-modal, multi-use, multi-story transit facility north of Downtown Houston. METRO Solutions, the region's comprehensive transit plan, identifies the Intermodal Terminal as one of numerous mobility enhancements recommended to improve intermodal connectivity for current and future transportation improvement projects. The proposed facility would act as a major hub for METRO's service area, enabling residents, visitors and workers to easily transfer between the different modes of transit.

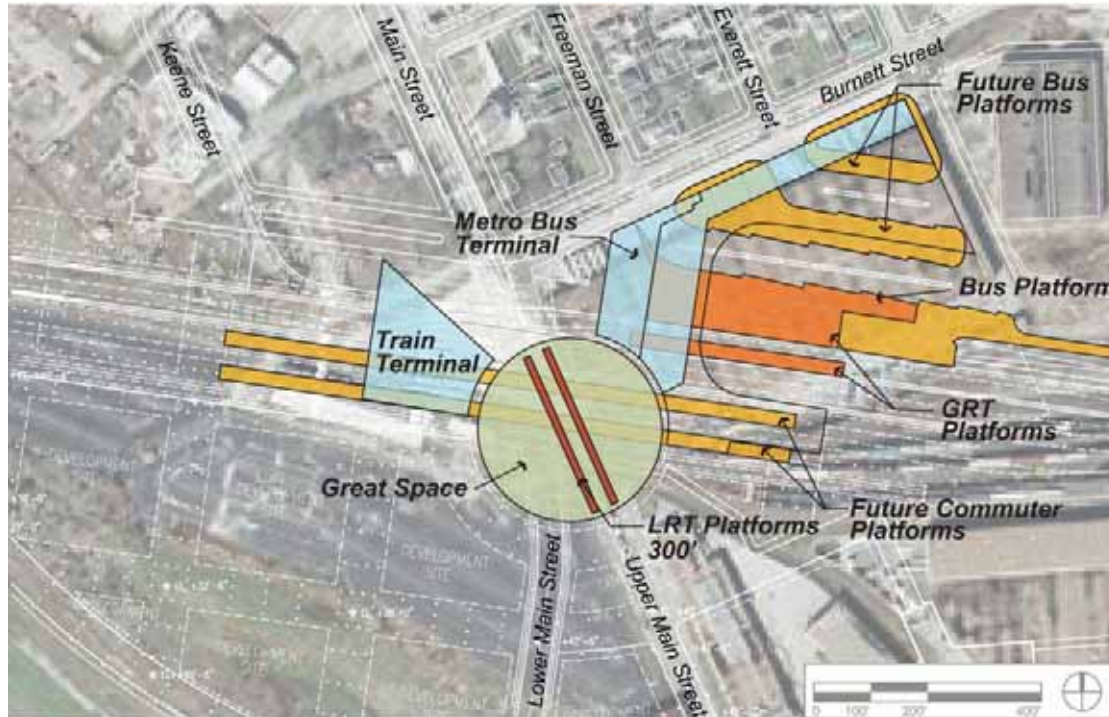
This conceptual design effort and associated environmental assessment is being conducted under Federal Transit Administration grant TX-90-X708. It is METRO's intent to pursue full federal funding for the design and construction of this project. Anticipated funding categories include, but are not limited to, Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5307, Formula, and Section 5309, Discretionary Bus Funding; Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ); and Surface Transportation Program-Metropolitan Mobility funds. The exact amounts and funding years for these sources are subject to the local Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) programming actions.

In addition to creating intermodal connectivity, the IT would promote development strategies that encourage pedestrian-oriented activities and provide a mix of retail, commercial and residential uses. This type of development is known as transit-oriented development (TOD) (Reconnecting America 2003). Conceptual plans for in-fill development incorporating aspects of TOD are being formulated in conjunction with the proposed transit facility. However, independent of any potential TOD development, the need for the proposed terminal is to serve existing and future passenger needs. The transit facility design and construction would proceed on a timeline independent from any development components. This document will assess the impacts of only the IT and infrastructure necessary to provide a functional transit facility.

The proposed facility would be designed to house passenger waiting and transfer facilities for the existing and projected volume of local buses that serve the

immediate area (4 bus bays). It would also provide access to Light Rail Transit (LRT) and Guided Rapid Transit (GRT) platforms; bicycle storage facilities; and passenger and driver amenities, including parking, public restrooms, retail and concessions. Improvements to several surrounding roads would be required to provide safe and convenient access for buses and the traveling public.

Figure 1-1 Conceptual Layout



This conceptual layout illustrates the interface of numerous transportation modes, including those intended for future implementation dependant upon separate environmental clearance documents.

The IT is being evaluated as an independent facility. The implementation of other transit modes to serve this facility, such as the North Corridor LRT/GRT and potential future East End and SE GRT, has been considered in this analysis. The impacts of this connectivity has been included in appropriate sections of this environmental assessment. If these assumptions contained in this EA regarding these independent projects prove invalid, then the analyses contained in this EA may need to be reconsidered.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT AREA

The proposed project is located in the Near Northside neighborhood of downtown Houston. It is centered at the junction of the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) and Main Street, approximately 1,600 feet north of IH 10. In general, the project area is bounded by the UPRR, Keene Street, Harrington Street and Burnett Streets on the north; Hardy Road on the east; IH 10/US 90 on the south; and White Oak

Bayou on the west (**Figure 1-2**). The project area is defined as the general vicinity where the IT would be located. The project footprint covers the areas that would be disturbed by construction activities associated with the IT, such as buildings, roadways, track relocation and other infrastructure improvements.

A major portion of this area includes UH-Downtown's remote parking lots, the Hardy Rail Yard and commercial/industrial buildings formerly associated with rail activity. The remaining portion is bisected by the UPRR and consists of several commercial warehouses and abandoned industrial structures. In addition, a portion of the area is within the 100- and 500-year floodplains of the White Oak Bayou. The Northside Village residential area is located north of Burnett Street adjacent to the project area.

The proposed facility would be constructed adjacent to METRO Solutions' proposed North Corridor, which includes two elements: the extension of LRT from the University Station to a proposed Station off of Burnett Street and the implementation of GRT¹ serving destinations north of the station. The proximity of the proposed IT at this location would provide an enhanced interface with these and other future modes of transportation. **Figure 1-4** illustrates the location of the proposed facility in relation to existing and proposed transportation improvements.

Figure 1-3. Industrial structures adjacent to Hardy Rail yard.



1.3 DEVELOPMENT HISTORY OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

In 2003, voters in the METRO service area approved METRO Solutions, which is a comprehensive transit plan that provides a range of technologies and services to address the varying mobility needs of specific corridors and the community at large through 2025. In support of METRO Solutions, in 2005 the Houston Downtown Management District initiated an inter-governmental agency study, referred to as the Houston Intermodal Center/Multimodal Terminal Feasibility Study. The study was financed with contributions from numerous agencies, including METRO, and sought to solicit input from stakeholders regarding how they might use the facility, determine the best location for the facility and build a cohesive group of IT stakeholders who would support funding applications for the facility.

¹ Guided Rapid Transit (GRT) operates on its own dedicated right-of-way and is designed to not preclude future fixed guideway transit.



Source: USDA Aerial Photography, 2005.

LEGEND



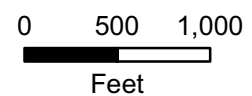
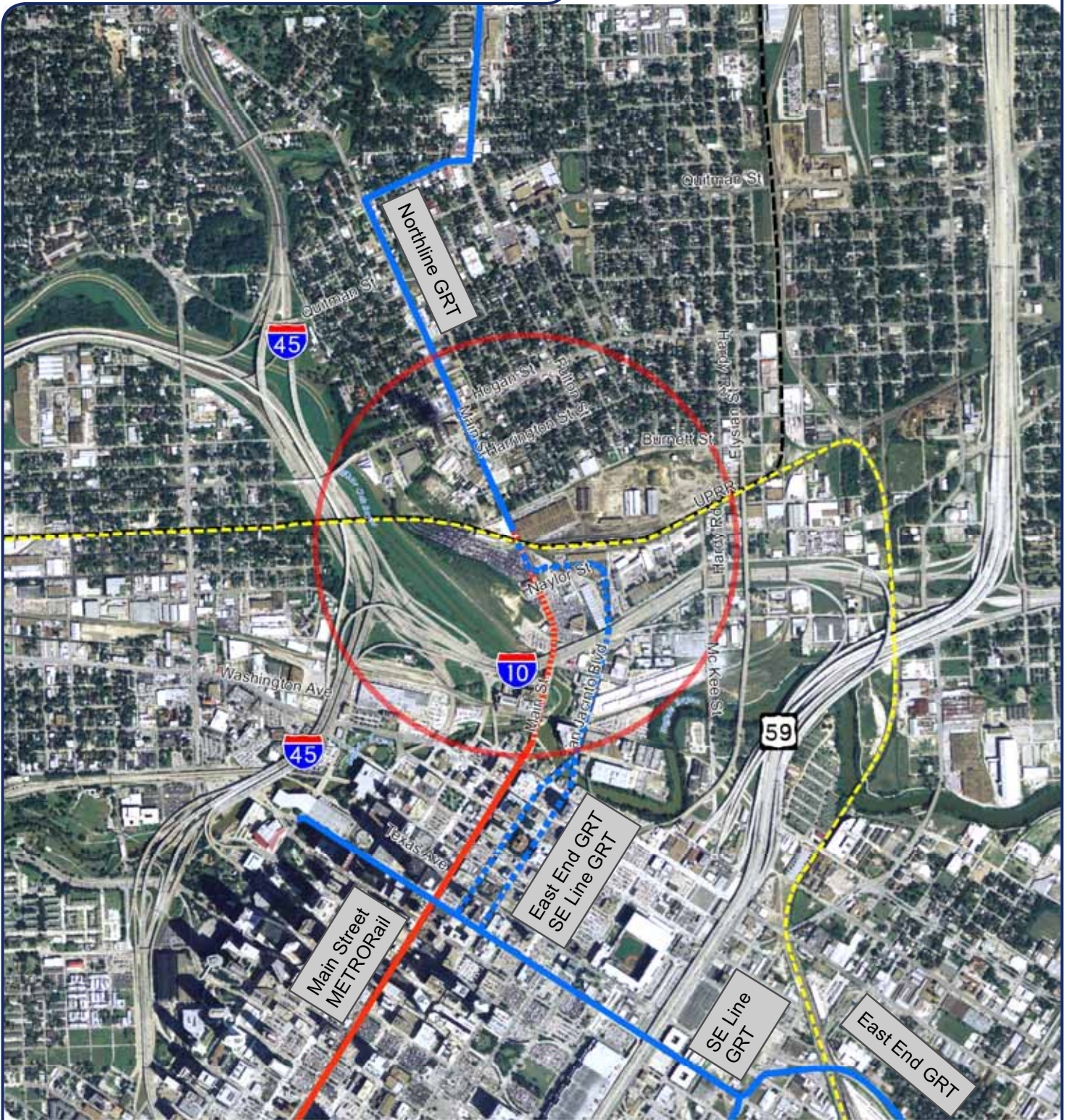
-  Project Area
-  Proposed Project Footprint

FIGURE 1-2



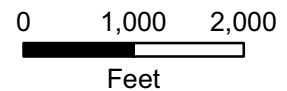


Source: METRO, 2006. USDA Aerial Photography, 2005.

LEGEND

- Potential Commuter Rail
- Potential High-Speed Rail (TUHX)
- GRT
- GRT Option
- LRT Extension
- METRO Rail
- Half Mile Radius

FIGURE 1-4



As referenced in the Houston Intermodal Center/Multimodal Terminal Feasibility Study, seven zones within the Houston metropolitan region were initially identified as candidates for accommodating multiple transportation programs for numerous transportation providers. An area just north of downtown was selected as the preferred alternative for a full-capacity intermodal terminal, which could, if space allowed, potentially accommodate passenger and operating functions of national and international bus carriers. This area is a highly visible destination, which would allow for opportunities for intermodal connectivity to the existing transportation infrastructure as well as the potential to accommodate a large activity center.

In order to further refine the possible locations, the feasibility study identified seven sub-areas within this zone as potentially viable for site development. Of these sub-areas, the White Oak and Hardy Yards areas were identified as the preferred location of the IT. Additional information regarding the selection process is detailed in Chapter 2.0, Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives.

1.4 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

METRO's multi-modal transit system is early in its ultimate development. The success of the Main Street LRT and extensive High Occupancy Vehicle system, demonstrates the region's commitment to supporting further transportation enhancements. As this multi-modal system further develops, the IT would serve the following purposes:

- Increase regional connectivity/transit effectiveness – The existing transit system provides reasonable access to job opportunities through the service area, especially for transit-dependent populations. The proposed facility would expand those opportunities for current and prospective transit riders. Access to jobs throughout the region would be improved due to the enhanced connectivity.
- Offer an alternative to single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) travel – Traffic congestion in the region will continue to increase at a considerable pace. Options to increase roadway capacity are limited physically and financially. Improving transit offers alternatives to SOV travel within the region and is an effective operational strategy to reduce peak period congestion levels.
- Improve access and increase economic development opportunities – The proposed project would provide access for residents and visitors to employment, educational and entertainment centers throughout the region. Access to and from the regional destinations served by METRO's LRT and bus service would also be enhanced. This increased accessibility would strengthen economic conditions at existing activity centers and provide an opportunity for further economic development in the project area. Demographic shifts and changes in economic conditions contribute

to changes in housing demand in urban areas (Reconnecting America 2003). Such changes could be addressed in the future by TOD elements, which respond to changing demand by providing location-efficient mixed-use places that typically include a variety of housing types in addition to a mix of retail, office and commercial uses. The intersection of a variety of transportation options, like the IT, would allow these development types to be accessed and utilized by members of the local community, residents of the TOD housing units and commuters making connections between the transportation modes. The presence of such a large and diverse pool of users encourages the success of TOD elements whose ultimate success would depend on consumers and tenants.

1.5 NEED FOR THE PROPOSED PROJECT

The Houston area will continue to expand and the impact on its associated infrastructure will be stretched. For transportation, surface streets will become further congested; travel time will be increased for drivers and transit riders; and air quality will further deteriorate. METRO Solutions is one component of the region's efforts to address these transportation issues. The specific transit investment of the proposed IT in the north downtown area would:

- Provide increased connections to major employment, entertainment, commercial and educational activity centers throughout the region;
- Improve air quality by reducing traffic congestion near the downtown area;
- Improve transit service through reduced travel time and increased reliability;
- Contribute to improvements in regional air quality; and
- Improve regional mobility through effective and efficient transit.