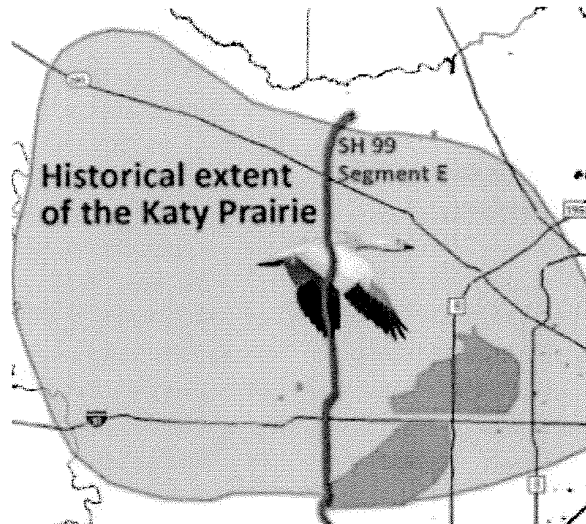


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## Third Houston Outerbelt Would Turn Prairies Into Texas Toast

Posted By [Angie Schmitt](#) On April 28, 2011 @ 11:56 am In [Highway Expansion, Houston, Sprawl](#) | [No Comments](#)

There's a place just outside Houston where the vinyl siding and attached garages thin out and recede into grasslands.



[1]

The Katy Prairie, one of the country's last remaining natural grasslands and an important bird habitat, may be replaced with a highway and sprawl. Image: [Houston Tomorrow](#) [2]

In this place — one of the country's few remaining tall-grass prairies — something amazing happens each fall. First hundreds, then thousands, then millions of birds arrive here at Katy Prairie, an international wintering grounds for migratory birds, especially waterfowl.

Over the decades, this 1,000 square mile sanctuary has largely survived the encroachment of farmers and relentless development pressure from neighboring Houston, thanks in no small part to its dedicated supporters.

But the Katy Prairie has never faced a opponent like the Grand Parkway before. Piece by piece, the Houston area has been building a third — yes, third — bypass for the region. And much to the horror of local environmentalists, the next segment is planned to directly bisect this extraordinary habitat.

Development of this pristine land isn't just collateral damage — it's the point of the project. Project sponsors make no bones about it: The 15.2-mile Grand Parkway segment through Katy Prairie is a \$462 million development project as much as it is a transportation project. Known as "Segment E," it would be the third phase in a 180-mile "scenic bypass" for Houston. Each of the 11 segments is considered a separate and "[independently justifiable project](#)" [3]."

Billy Burge of the Grand Parkway Association says right now there isn't much need for Segment E, in terms of traffic. Burge and his colleagues don't shy away from the fact that the project will generate more car trips and sprawl. In fact, they have what you might call a "build it and they will come" philosophy about road-building and traffic.

"There's real demand in 15 to 17 years to have this," said Burge, who chairs the association

overseeing the project for the state and the region. "Once that link is completed, you'll have a steady stream of traffic."

To hear Burge and his colleagues at TexDOT and Harris County tell it, they are simply trying to get out ahead of what they see as inevitable: sprawl, on top of sprawl, on top of sprawl. But not in a bad way, they say.

"It will increase sprawl but that's really the reason people come to Houston: to have a big house and a big yard," said Burge. "You can call it sprawl, or you can call it quality of life."



[4]

Bridgeland development advertises its closeness to the Katy Prairie. But if the Grand Parkway is completed, developments like this one will likely replace most of the important grasslands. Photo: [Bridgeland](#) [5]

If you want to see what will likely replace the switchgrass and wildflowers of Katy, look to the [Bridgeland](#) [6] development. This massive, 12,000-acre "new urbanism" development, where homes sell from \$160,000 to north of \$1 million, stalled in the real estate crisis. Since then, developers have stepped up pressure on local authorities to bring forward highway infrastructure needed to jump start sales.

Meanwhile, local environmentalists are pushing back. Conservationists and bird-watchers feel so strongly about the Katy Prairie that in 2009, when 1,000 acres were threatened by development, volunteers painstakingly dug up every inch and transplanted it on land owned by the Katy Prairie Conservancy.

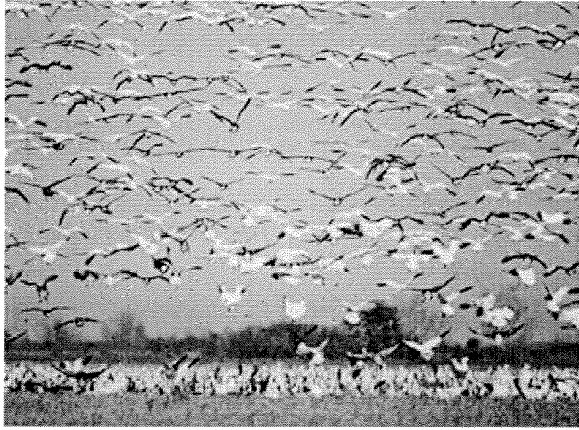
In March 2009, the Sierra Club filed suit against the FHWA, alleging that the agency was wrong to provide preliminary environmental approval for the project. Though its first attempt to halt the project was struck down in court, the group is currently awaiting the results of an appeal.

Sierra's Lone-Star Chapter charges that project sponsors purposely constrained "the purpose and need" section of the plan to preclude the no-build option. Further, the environmental assessment ignored the impact of induced growth.

The Sierra Club has also appealed to the Army Corps of Engineers to deny the permit needed to fill in wetlands. Wildlife concerns aside, the Sierra Club says, the Grand Parkway proposal presents a real flooding problem. The wetlands act as a sponge to prevent flooding downstream. Local transportation officials' plan to fill in the prairie and build a new wetlands 30 miles away won't cut it, said Sierra's Brandt Mannchen.

"This project is a poster child of everything that's bad about losing wetlands about reducing water quality," he said.

The Sierra Club and other local environmental groups have proposed a series of alternatives. The Sierra Club, for example, would support making the whole structure a bridge or widening existing arterial roads that connect I-10 and US-290.



[7]

Each year, millions of birds winter in the grasslands of the Katy Prairie. Photo: [Swamplots](#) [8]

Jay Crossley of the local think tank [Houston Tomorrow](#) [9] says the money would be better spent improving transportation options where people already live, through transit, bikeways and micro-level road projects.

"It's a speculative investment project while all our elected officials basically say we're broke," he said. "I think it has rightfully been characterized as the worst transportation project in the country."

The reaction isn't much more positive in the 221 pages of public comments [[PDF](#) [10]] submitted to the Grand Parkway Association on Segment E.

"My hope is that Segment E will not be built at all because it will destroy the Katy Prairie as we know it and dramatically reduce wildlife habitat," said Ken Hartman of Houston in a letter to project leaders.

Said Steve Gross of Houston: "The Katy Prairie is a precious and dwindling resource for wildlife, including thousands of birds that utilize this area for a wintering and breeding grounds. I oppose any development project that fails to recognize these important areas."

Steven Gast, address not given, was more direct. "Such a waste of everything," he said. "Where do I vote against this, and everyone associated with it?"

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[1] Image: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/parkway-prairie-325x294.jpg>

[2] Houston Tomorrow: <http://www.houstontomorrow.org/livability/story/sierra-club-files-suit-against-grand-parkway/>

[3] independently justifiable project: <http://www.grandpky.com/segments/default.asp>

[4] Image: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/village-life-new-home-builders.jpg>

[5] Bridgeland: <http://www.bridgeland.com/communities/water-haven>

[6] Bridgeland: <http://www.bridgeland.com/communities/village-life>

[7] Image: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/geese-katy-prairie.jpg>

[8] Swamplots: <http://swamplot.com/new-500-acre-lake-bringing-nature-to-the->