



CITY OF HOUSTON

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Testimony of Joshua Sanders
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Texas Senate Committee on Transportation

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Chair Robert Nichols, Vice-Chair Royce West and Members of the Committee,

My name is Joshua Sanders and I am providing written testimony in support of Senate Bill 1555, which establishes a grant program under the Texas Transportation Code to fund railroad grade separation projects.

The importance of railroads to Houston and the region cannot be understated. Houston has the second largest rail system in North America behind the City of Chicago. The City of Houston has over 700 rail crossings, of which, a little over 400 intersect at public roadways. Twenty of these intersections are within a quarter mile of a school or park, resulting in hazardous rail crossings and blocked intersections, placing lives at risk. Safety concerns for communities that live, work or attend school near rail intersections are growing in Houston as dangerous encounters with stopped trains at rail crossings increase.

To eliminate hazards at rail crossings, we build at-grade separations, either as underpasses or overpasses, many of which require additional right-of-way, pump-stations, storm water mitigation, and other improvements depending on the density and land use of the communities in which they are located. General costs of grade separations per the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) can range from \$5 million to \$50 million per crossing. With additional funding opportunities to provide grade separations, such as what SB 1555 aims to do, we can significantly improve the mobility of people and goods, resulting in enhanced regional economic strength, quality of life, and economic vitality of directly impacted communities. More importantly, with additional resources, we can enhance safety at rail crossings for pedestrians, drivers, and emergency response vehicles and minimize the hazards of stopped trains.

The cost of grade separation projects is significantly higher than that of a typical road reconstruction. Many local governments cannot allocate funds for project development without incurring significant risks to their capital improvement budgets and projected future capital outlays. As a result, the City of Houston, along with its partners, seek federal discretionary grants through the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) and Railroad Crossing Elimination (RCE) grant programs

to help close funding gaps. I am hopeful that with the passage of SB 1555 the City of Houston can look to the State of Texas for additional grant funding opportunities for grade separations.

We have identified several grade separation projects that could have significant impacts on safety in our communities. One grade separation project is at the complex intersection of Griggs Street, Long Street, and Mykawa Street. This grade separation project aims to elevate the roadway above the existing UP/BNSF railroad line between Texas State Highway 35's four at-grade rail crossings and Griggs, Long, and Mykawa Streets (GLM Crossing).

In 2022, the FRA awarded a CRISI grant to one of Houston's economic development partners, the Greater Southeast Management District, for design of the GLM Crossing grade separation project. In 2024, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), along with the City of Houston and Houston METRO, partnered to submit another CRISI grant application for construction costs of \$96.5 million – a portion of the \$126.3 million total project cost. Despite a strong tri-party application and established contributions toward the local match by Houston, METRO, and consultant design services from TxDOT, the coalition was unsuccessful in securing additional funds for the GLM Crossing project. Should SB 1555 pass, we could apply for additional grade separation grant funding and alleviate some of the construction costs associated with the GLM Crossing project.

According to FRA statistics, Texas ranks second in trespassing casualties (fatalities and injuries) reporting 131 total casualties in 2024, and ranks number one in collisions and fatalities, reporting 283 collisions in 2024 at highway-rail grade crossings. Creating state grant funding opportunities would not only benefit the Houston region, but also other parts of the state where communities are facing similar challenges. With the creation of state grant funding for grade separations we could make much needed improvements at various rail crossings in our city.

We appreciate your consideration and continued support.