

When construction on Shepherd-Durham in Heights could finally end, and what changes are coming

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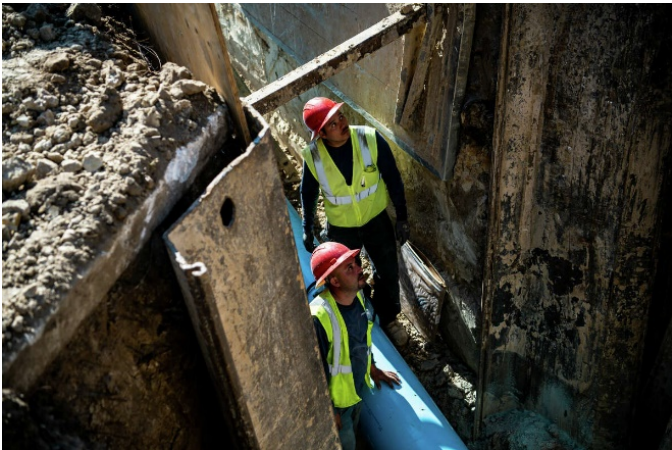
A SER Construction crew works to build a bike lane on West 20th Street, between Beall Street and North Durham Drive, on Thursday, October 27, 2022 in Houston, Texas. The work is part of the Memorial Heights Redevelopment Authorities Shepherd Durham Project, that will improve infrastructure, landscaping and build bike lanes and sidewalks along the Shepherd Durham corridor.

(Meridith Kohut / For the Houston Chronicle)

To improve some of the biggest streets in the Heights area, workers have gone to impressive depths, Ann Lents learned.

“You don’t think about what is all under there, until you start something like this,” said Lents, who chairs the [Memorial Heights Redevelopment Authority](#).

As one crew digs a trench for a new water or sewer line, another is installing the pipe. Down the block workers are tying steel, moving dirt or pouring concrete.



A SER Construction crew works to install a new underground water pipe at the intersection of North Durham Drive and West 20th Street on Thursday, October 27, 2022 in Houston, Texas.

(Meridith Kohut / For the Houston Chronicle)

When the workers clear — still months away — [Shepherd and Durham](#), along with some major side streets, will be remade, and in many ways reformed. The streets, dual thoroughfares that funnel traffic between Memorial Drive and Loop 610, will remain major commuting corridors, but with wider sidewalks, bike lanes and spruced-up trees and intersections.

“It certainly could look a lot better,” Heights resident Christie Aycock said. “As it is, there is all this building going on, but you cannot get to it without a car.”

NEXT STEPS: [Push made for Grand Parkway to extend in Brazoria, Galveston](#)

Lack of viable options beyond automobiles is a constant in many Houston neighborhoods, to which the city, various management districts, Harris County and other entities are taking a piecemeal approach to correcting. Some projects, including the \$120 million plan for Shepherd within Loop 610, also have federal funding attached.

When completed in sections between 2024 and 2028, the work along Shepherd and Durham will have added sidewalks and a separated bike lane to both streets. The sidewalk redo also will bring the entire route up to Americans with Disabilities Act standards, a huge improvement for those who use wheelchairs or other assistance.

To make room for cyclists and walkers in the same right of way, the four-lane streets will be trimmed to three lanes, with some dedicated turn lanes at major intersections.

Analyses showed traffic congestion on both streets was due to turns, so losing a lane but gaining turn areas should help drivers proceed more efficiently.

“Both our study and the city’s show it improves congestion,” said Sherry Weesner, president of the redevelopment authority.



Deputy Construction Manager Matt Kainer (left) inspects work on a bike lane that is being built on West 20th Street, between Beall Street and North Durham Drive, on Thursday, October 27, 2022 in Houston, Texas. The work is part of the Memorial Heights Redevelopment Authority’s Shepherd Durham Project, that will improve infrastructure, landscaping and build bike lanes and sidewalks along the Shepherd Durham corridor.

(Meridith Kohut / For the Houston Chronicle)

Growing Network

The various projects, including two others on Shepherd that add bike lanes or wide sidewalks or both, and planned changes to 11th Street and transit routes, combine to create the “paradigm shift” Mayor Sylvester Turner has advocated for transportation in Houston. Drivers will maintain fast access to area freeways and major cross-streets, while cyclists and pedestrians will see eased access to other dedicated bikeways and trails.

“It serves the neighborhood,” Houston’s chief transportation planner, David Fields said of the various projects, “As you extend and connect pieces, it has benefit to the region overall.”

South of Washington Avenue to Memorial Drive, Houston Public Works is more than halfway through a [rebuild of Shepherd and Durham that resurfaces both the streets](#) atop new drainage pipes, along with rebuilding six smaller streets between the two thoroughfares. The \$12 million project also is adding lighting and bike lanes, and like the northern segment, will trim vehicle lanes from four to three to make room for bicyclists and pedestrians.

“While the contractor has faced supply and staffing issues due to the pandemic, they have a plan in place to finish in the spring,” said Erin Jones, spokeswoman for Houston Public Works.

BIG BET ON BUSES: [Next step to better transit is predicting where people want to go](#)

Farther south, between Westheimer and Richmond, a [\\$27 million rebuild of Shepherd](#) has frustrated businesses and travelers for months, but promises better drainage for the western Montrose and Upper Kirby neighborhoods nearby. Shepherd, meanwhile, will get similar sidewalks and rebuilt intersections aimed at making the street less chaotic, but with the same two lanes in each direction for drivers.

Once the Shepherd work moves to the next phase south of 15th, the bike lanes will connect with bike lanes being developed along 11th Street through the Heights.

Though controversial with some residents, the 11th Street lanes form an east-west route from Shepherd that feed into other trails closer to downtown Houston.

Another east-west route, meanwhile, could carry many more commuters into downtown. Metropolitan Transit Authority’s planned [Inner Katy bus rapid transit line](#) includes a proposed stop at Shepherd-Durham on the south side of Interstate 10. As

Metro creates the line, it has said connectivity by bike and on foot is crucial, along with improved bus service along the entire Shepherd corridor so residents as far north as Acres Homes have access.

Once stitched together, the projects will turn Shepherd from a "stroad" — the pejorative planners use for a road with wide, fast vehicle lanes and dilapidated sidewalks that act primarily as a pass-through for cars and trucks — into something more in line with a neighborhood street.

"When we get a number of these projects done, we will see a crescendo of use, I really believe that," Lents said.



Donald Sykes, 65, directs traffic around the construction and road closure at the intersection of North Durham Drive and West 20th Street on Thursday, October 27, 2022 in Houston, Texas. The work is part of the Memorial Heights Redevelopment Authority's Shepherd Durham Project, that will improve infrastructure, landscaping and build bike lanes and sidewalks along the Shepherd Durham corridor.

(Meridith Kohut / For the Houston Chronicle)

From the Ground Up

The benefits, however, will take time. Work in the Heights could take until 2028 to remake Shepherd and Durham from Loop 610 to Interstate 10, though residents from 15th Street north could see new sidewalks and lanes by mid-to-late 2024.

Before those cyclists and pedestrians claim the space, however, there is a lot of unseen work to do. Crews are digging up the streets in phases to replace aging water and sewer lines along Shepherd, Durham and many cross-streets. Last week at 20th and Durham there was a flurry of activity that drivers and others will soon never see, once it is all topped with new concrete.

TWO BRIDGES, ONE BIG IDEA: [Advocates advance idea of new trail bridges in Heights](#)

Construction thus far has been smooth, but required adjustments. CenterPoint failed to move utility poles were not moved in time, so crews changed how they will build the streets. Work now moves from one side to the center, then to the other side, as opposed to simply from the left to the right, said Matt Kainer, deputy construction manager for the project's designer, Quiddity Engineering.

Work also has come with a few surprises.

"We found a gas line that everyone thought was four feet below the street line was four inches," Lents said. "This is a very old part of town and when you dig into a street you don't know what you are going to hit."