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\$20 million for street, trail improvements

Westchase District gets grants to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment

By Annette Baird | December 23, 2015

Twelve year-old **Bryce Willoughby**'s walk to see friends or to the bus stop from his home on the corner of Walnut Bend and Meadowglen in west Houston has presented challenges since he and his mom moved there six years ago.

He said sidewalks are broken off, they dead end and are generally in poor shape. In addition, he said there are no parks or outdoor spaces for kids to play or hang out.

"We definitely need improvements," Bryce's mom Anya Willoughby said. "I love this neighborhood - it's very diverse, very rich with culture, but we don't see a lot of it, because it's not conducive to neighbors being outside."

Though it may be a few years off, changes are afoot, thanks to the award of \$20 million in grants to the Westchase District for street improvements and a hike and bike trail.

Houston-**Galveston Area Council**, the regional organization through which local entities help solve transportation problems, recently approved the district's request for funding of three projects.

The grants originally totaled \$16.5 million, but were recently adjusted for inflation.

Irma Sanchez, the district's vice president of projects, said the projects are vital to the economic health and vitality of the district, a municipal management district that covers a 4.2 square-mile area around Sam Houston Tollway, from Bellaire Boulevard to Deerwood.

"These infrastructure improvements will allow owners to continue to invest and reinvest in the area," she said. "We are trying to encourage investors to densify the area and bring in more mixed-use type of development."

Some \$10.3 million will go towards an estimated \$17.2 million worth of improvements for a three-mile stretch along Westheimer Road from Rocky Ridge to Kirkwood.

They include replacing and widening sidewalks on both sides, new bus shelters, enhancements to crosswalks and the addition of pedestrian lighting.

The city of Houston is putting up the rest of the money, while the Westchase District is partnering with [Texas Department of Transportation](#) to administer the project.

Sanchez said Westheimer is one of Metro's busiest routes, especially from Gessner to Walnut Bend, with many people using the sidewalks to get to their destination.

"The sidewalks haven't been touched since the late '70s and are in total disrepair," she said. "As we try to create a denser environment, there is a need to provide a pedestrian friendly environment for workers and residents."

A \$9.2 million grant will go toward the estimated \$22.1 million it will cost for reconstruction of a 1.2 mile stretch along Walnut Bend Lane, from Westheimer to Westpark.

The project involves reconstruction of the roadway and curb, underground utility upgrades, new landscaping and bike lanes on the road.

Sanchez said the design process for both projects should be completed in 2017 with construction slated to start in 2018.

A grant for \$460,800 is earmarked for a .62-mile, 10-foot wide trail along CenterPoint's utility corridor west of Wilcrest from Richmond to Westheimer, backing up to the [Houston Community College](#) campus, which is currently under construction.

Construction of the trail is expected to start in the spring.

"This trail is another step in the direction to get us connected to regional trail systems outside the district," said Sanchez, referring to Terry Hershey and Brays Bayou trails.

The grant awards came about after planning and a series of public meetings seeking input from residents, business owners and workers in the district.

Willoughby and her son want accessible sidewalks and more outdoor spaces for recreational use.

"This will help create areas for people to congregate in outdoor spaces and create a sense of community," she said.

For **Jim Russ**, owner of EHRA Engineering, the improvements will entice new businesses and residents to the area and ensure those already here will stay put.

"We are particularly interested in making sure the Westchase District continues to thrive and stay prominent as a business district in west Houston," he said. "It's a great place to operate a business."