

The **North Houston Highway Improvement Project** (often called Houston's "Big Dig") is currently in its early construction phases, with active work focused on **flood mitigation** and **drainage infrastructure** in downtown Houston as of mid-2026.

Current Construction Status (2026)

Active work is concentrated in **Segment 3**, specifically the **3B-1** phase, which involves installing massive storm sewers and box culverts to direct water into new detention ponds. A key feature under construction is a **76-million-gallon detention pond** on Runnels Street designed to prevent flooding similar to Hurricane Harvey. Crews are also excavating deep trenches (up to 50 feet) to install drainage pipes near St. Emmanuel and McIlhenny streets.

Recent updates in early 2026 included extended closures of **Chartres Street** and **Emanuel Street** to facilitate this underground utility work. TxDOT officials estimate that this critical drainage infrastructure could be completed by **2028**, while the mainlane reconstruction and broader project are now projected to finish between **2038 and 2042**, with costs rising to approximately **\$13 billion** due to inflation and design changes.

Major Structural Changes

The project fundamentally alters the downtown freeway loop:

- **Rerouting I-45:** The highway is being shifted from the west side of downtown (the current Pierce Elevated path) to run parallel with **I-10** on the north side and **I-69** on the east side.
- **Removing the Pierce Elevated:** Once the new route is complete, the existing elevated structure known as the **Pierce Elevated** will be decommissioned and likely demolished, removing a physical barrier between neighborhoods like **Midtown** and **Downtown**.
- **Below-Grade Freeways:** Significant portions of the new I-45 and I-69 corridors through downtown will be depressed (below grade), allowing for "caps" or decks to be built over them. These caps are intended to reconnect street grids and create new public spaces.

Segments and Timeline

The project is divided into three main segments, with construction proceeding sequentially:

1. **Segment 3 (Downtown):** Currently underway. Includes rerouting I-45, reconstructing I-10 and I-69, and flood control. Expected to see major completion milestones by **2030**.
2. **Segment 2 (North of Downtown):** Planned to begin after 2030. Involves widening I-45 from I-10 to Beltway 8.
3. **Segment 1 (Further North):** Currently unfunded and in early discussion phases, with construction not expected to start until after 2030.

Controversy and Community Impact

Despite the groundbreaking, the project remains contentious. Critics, including the **Greater Houston Coalition for Justice** and former Harris County officials, argue the expansion will displace hundreds of predominantly minority families and businesses, worsen air quality, and induce more traffic rather than solving congestion.

To proceed, TxDOT signed a **Voluntary Resolution Agreement** with the Federal Highway Administration in 2023, committing to:

- Enhanced public engagement.
- **\$30 million** in assistance for displaced residents and businesses.
- Integration of green spaces, sidewalks, and bike paths.
- Strict air quality monitoring during construction.

While some community leaders accept these concessions as a path forward, opposition groups continue to monitor the project closely, ensuring TxDOT adheres to these civil rights and environmental commitments.