



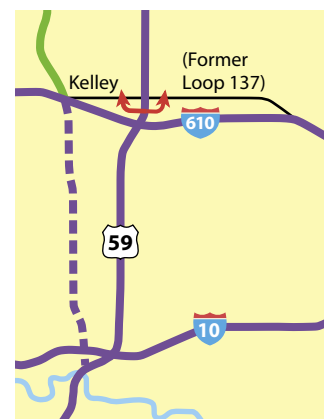
The beginnings of the Eastex Freeway: This view shows the cleared corridor for the Eastex Freeway just north of downtown in January 1954. The frontage road section in the upper part of the photograph and a short section of main lanes at the top of the photo were officially dedicated on December 22, 1953. On the opening day, the winning entry in a contest to name the freeway was announced. (Photo: *Houston Chronicle*, January 11, 1954)







The motorized merry-go-round: These views look north along the Eastex Freeway at Kelley Road. The upper view on the opposite page shows construction on August 3, 1954. At the time Kelley Road was Loop 137, the predecessor to Loop 610. A traffic circle was used for this interchange. It was a good thing that traffic circles were rare in Houston, because Houston motorists and traffic circles don't mix well. From 1964 to 1966 the intersection was the most dangerous in Houston, with 121 accidents in 1965 and 136 accidents in 1966. In 1969 the *Houston Post* reported, "Few other intersections can begin to compete with the more than 100 annual smash-ups on this motorized merry-go-round." The signage along the Eastex Freeway shown in the lower photo attempted to help motorists navigate the intersection. The completion of the North Loop in 1975 finally diverted traffic from the traffic circle, allowing TxDOT to remove it and replace it with a standard bridge, shown in the photo above. The Eastex Freeway was built to its present configuration in 1998.¹⁰¹ (Photos: opposite page upper, Squire Haskins Photography, Dallas; opposite page lower, TxDOT; above, September 2002)





Freeway construction: This August 3, 1954, view looks south along the original construction of US 59 just north of IH 10. Expansion of this section of freeway was completed in 1998. (Photo: Squire Haskins Photography, Dallas)

that day on, the freeway would be known as the Eastex Freeway. Houston's first two freeways, the Gulf and the Eastex, would be the only Houston freeways to be named by contests.¹⁰²

By the end of 1953 work was underway both to the north and south of the completed section. Freeway openings became a regular occurrence during the rest of the 1950s, pushing the freeway northward toward Beltway 8. North of Houston, the Eastex Freeway was initially constructed as an expressway and later upgraded to full freeway standards. By March 1970, the Eastex Freeway was a full freeway from downtown to the Will Clayton Parkway entrance of Bush Intercontinental Airport. At the time, Will Clayton Parkway was called Jetero Boulevard.

A Quiet Corridor

As one of Houston's earliest freeways, the Eastex Freeway suffered from the low standards of first generation freeway design. The freeway was narrow, overpasses lacked shoulders, and ramps had poor geometrics. There were only six freeway lanes from downtown to just north of Loop 610, and only four freeway lanes north of Loop 610. The low capacity of the freeway did not immediately become a problem because the Eastex Freeway corridor remained quiet in terms of real estate development. The Eastex Freeway became one of the two main access routes to Houston Intercontinental Airport (now Bush Intercontinental Airport) when the airport opened in June 1969, but the airport opening spawned almost no commercial development along the Eastex Freeway. In 1971 Friendswood Development (then a division of the Exxon Corporation) launched the 14,000-acre Kingwood master-planned community in far north Houston just east of the Eastex Freeway. The community became highly successful. The Eastex Freeway would remain devoid of major commercial development until the opening of Deerbrook Mall in 1984 in Humble near Kingwood.¹⁰³

By the 1980s the Eastex Freeway frontage roads had become lined with junkyards, used car lots, and other low-grade commercial establishments. The vintage 1950s-era freeway design and unsightly clutter had become an embarrassment to Houston, especially since it was one of the main routes to Houston's principal airport. The reconstruction of the Eastex Freeway became one of the top priorities of local leaders in the early 1980s when plans for the next generation of improvements to Houston's freeways were being formulated. When Houstonian Bob Lanier became chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission in 1983, he made the reconstruction of the Eastex Freeway one of his priorities, moving the project forward in the line for state funding.

The Expansion

The Eastex Freeway expansion required the largest right-of-way clearance in Houston since the early 1970s. The freeway corridor right-of-way width, which was typically 256 to 300 feet (78 to 91 m), would need to be widened to 400 feet (122 m) for the 10-lane sections of

"The Eastex Freeway widening has been a theater of the glacial."

Houston Chronicle, April 26, 1998

freeway and 376 feet (115 m) for the 8-lane sections. Nine churches, 196 businesses, 194 single-family homes, and 240 units of multifamily housing were to be displaced. Even with the depressed real estate prices following Houston's oil bust in the mid-1980s and the generally low property values in that section of Houston, the cost of the right-of-way acquisition and relocation was estimated to be \$205 million in 1985—308 million in 2003 dollars. There was some protest among businesses and the usual complaints from inner-city interests that the freeway would primarily benefit suburban communities like Kingwood, but the project had strong political support and moved forward without difficulty. The expansion had the big benefit of cleaning up much of the decay and clutter alongside the freeway, drastically improving its appearance.¹⁰⁴

The first construction contract for the Eastex Freeway expansion was awarded in 1991. The project turned out to be a long-running, drawn-out affair, with construction between downtown and Beltway 8 taking nearly all of the 1990s. The project was divided into numerous contracts with the usual three- to four-year construction period. The contractor on most of the construction contracts, Williams Brothers Construction, generally took six to seven years to complete the work on each of its contracts. A comprehensive report by the *Houston Chronicle* in 1998 cited numerous reasons for the delay, including utility relocations, unexpected environmental cleanup, TxDOT's project sequencing, and design changes after work began. But those factors couldn't account for a three-year delay, the report stated. The report speculated that the very low penalties for late completion of the contracts provided little incentive for the contractor to complete the projects on time, and actually made it advantageous for the contractor to divert resources to other, more profitable jobs. Whatever the reason, work proceeded at a glacial pace. The Eastex Freeway reconstruction project prompted TxDOT to use higher penalties for late completion on its future contracts, and Williams Brothers would go on to demonstrate an exemplary record for timely completion of projects in the following years.¹⁰⁵

Key dates in the history of the Eastex Freeway

1945	First official designation as a freeway. Full length designated as a freeway in 1953.
1953	First section opens and freeway named in a contest.
1979	Interchange at Loop 610 is completed.
1991	Reconstruction and expansion begins.
Future	Expansion north of Houston, complete interchange at Beltway 8.



Old and new: The photo at left looks north along the Eastex Freeway from the Greens Road overpass in 1978. The lower image shows the exact same location in 2002 after completion of the expansion. The Greens Road overpass was removed and the Eastex Freeway main lanes now go over Greens Road. The reconstructed Eastex Freeway has 10 general-purpose main lanes, a central transitway, and frontage roads. (Photos: left, TTI; lower, December 2002)





Before, during, and after:

These views show the East-ex Freeway-North Loop interchange in 1973, September 1977, and 2002. Completed in September 1979, this interchange was the last of Houston's first generation of four-level stack interchanges. It was, however, the first Houston interchange to include a frontage road—the East-ex Freeway northbound frontage road. All subsequent interchanges in Houston would include the frontage roads of both intersecting freeways. (Photos: upper, TxDOT; middle, Chuck Fuhs; lower, November 2002)





Tropical Storm Allison: The storm unleashed a huge flood event on Houston in June 2001. The Eastex Freeway drops below ground level at only one point. As shown above, the underpass was completely filled with water. (Photo: copyright Jim Olive/Stockyard.com)



Original Eastex: This view dated August 1981 shows the original four-lane freeway just north of Aldine Mail Road. Expansion of this section was completed in 1998. (Photo: Texas Transportation Institute)

Finally in 1998 sections under contract to Williams Brothers were being completed. By 1999, work had been completed from IH 10 downtown to the Will Clayton Parkway entrance of Bush Intercontinental Airport. The end result was worth the wait. The freeway features 10 continuous general purpose lanes for most of its length to the airport, with 8 on the remainder. It includes a fully integrated transitway facility and continuous frontage roads built to high standards. What was Houston's last vestige of a first generation freeway in 1990 had been transformed into one of Houston's most impressive freeway corridors. In 2003 work continued on expansion near the Kingwood community. Houston's newest five-level stack interchange was also under construction at Beltway 8, with half of the planned eight connectors being built in the current phase. Future plans will extend the freeway expansion further northward and complete the stack interchange at Beltway 8.