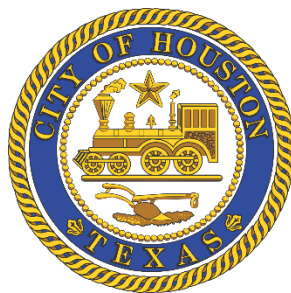




RECONNECTING COMMUNITIES: Gulfton and Beyond

**FY22 Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP)
Planning Grant Application**

**Total Project Cost: \$690,200
FY22 RCP Funds Requested: \$552,160**





CITY OF HOUSTON

Sylvester Turner

Mayor

P.O. Box 1562
Houston, Texas 77251-1562

Telephone – Dial 311
www.houstontx.gov

October 7, 2022

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

Large transportation infrastructure sometimes presents a paradox. Simultaneously, a project can connect and divide: linking some communities with great speed and ease, while erecting a barrier across others. Across Houston, communities are living with the aftermath of many such projects – excluded from their benefits while dealing with the brunt of their impacts. Transportation can be a force for equitable opportunity, but infrastructure like this is failing to live up to that promise.

Gulfton in southwest Houston is one such community divided by infrastructure, and the City of Houston is determined to make that infrastructure live up to its promise. With over 50 languages spoken and some of the lowest car ownership in the city, Gulfton is Houston's most dense, diverse, and transit-dependent neighborhood. Yet it is also home to some of Houston's widest, fastest, and least hospitable roadways – multilane thoroughfares like Hillcroft Avenue and hulking freeways like Interstate 69 and the Westpark Tollway. The City of Houston has made progress on addressing these challenges with our recent project to remake Hillcroft Avenue as a multimodal complete street. Still, legacy infrastructure to the north and south have proved to be formidable obstacles, limiting the reach of the City's investment and Gulfton's access to schools, parks, commercial centers, and transit hubs.

The Reconnecting Communities: Gulfton and Beyond study will empower the City of Houston to develop real solutions to these barriers as we look towards extending the Hillcroft Avenue complete street. Gulfton residents have told us they want to reach more destinations: Hillcroft Transit Center and Wisdom High School to the north, and the Brays Bayou Greenway Trail to the south. These extensions will require substantial technical analysis and coordination with the Texas Department of Transportation, METRO and other agencies. This planning grant will allow us to explore all alternatives, engage our partners and stakeholders, and prepare robust designs that are vetted and shovel ready.

The study area includes the Underserved Communities of Gulfton, Sharpstown, Mid-West, and Braeburn, home to people of color and generationally underserved families who are disproportionately impacted by legacy infrastructure. USDOT recognizes these communities as Historically Disadvantaged,

October 7, 2022

Page Two

Economy Disadvantaged, Equity Disadvantaged Resilience Disadvantaged, and Environmental Disadvantaged.

Houston has committed to changing our transportation paradigm. With USDOT's support, we will Reconnect Communities in Gulfton and Beyond.

I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sylvester Turner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sylvester Turner
Mayor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. OVERVIEW 1
Introduction..... 1
History..... 1
Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project..... 2
Upcoming Projects..... 3
Gulfton and Beyond Study..... 4
B. LOCATION AND MAP 6
C. RESPONSE TO MERIT CRITERIA 7
Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement 7
Mobility and Community Connectivity 7
Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships..... 9
Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity 10

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Interstate 69 and the Westpark Tollway (foreground) separate Gulfton (background) from destinations north..... 1
Figure 2: Multilane thoroughfares like Hillcroft Avenue (pictured) crisscross Gulfton and are challenging to cross on foot (Source: Houston Chronicle)..... 1
Figure 3: Of the 15 census tracts within the study area, 14 are considered historically disadvantaged by FHWA – including all within the Gulfton Super Neighborhood..... 2
Figure 4: Gulfton and Beyond study area..... 6
Figure 5: Distance as-the-crow-flies between Bella Luna Apartments to Hillcroft Transit Center compared with existing walking route 8
Figure 6: High School safety interns interview residents about their experiences navigating Gulfton’s streets (Source: Connect Community) 9
Figure 7: Hillcroft Street at High Star Road and Westward Street (*Source: UP Art Studio*). 10

**APPENDIX
LETTERS OF SUPPORT**

A. OVERVIEW

Introduction

Perhaps no Houston community is more poorly suited to its built environment than Gulfton. Known as the Ellis Island of Houston, it is the city's most diverse neighborhood – with over 50 languages spoken – and is the first stop and eventual home for many immigrants and refugees. Many of these new Houstonians arrive and live without a car, giving it the city's highest rate of walking, biking, and transit use. Yet its transportation infrastructure is built around a singular use: the single occupancy vehicle. Multilane thoroughfares crisscross the neighborhood, and two hulking freeways hem it in to the north and west (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). These roads don't just lack multimodal accommodation, they actively cut off Gulfton residents from accessing all their community has to offer.



Figure 1: Interstate 69 and the Westpark Tollway (foreground) separate Gulfton (background) from destinations north



Figure 2: Multilane thoroughfares like Hillcroft Avenue (pictured) crisscross Gulfton and are challenging to cross on foot (Source: Houston Chronicle)

Gulfton needs transportation infrastructure better suited to the community that exists today. The City of Houston is making progress: the recently completed Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project transformed a portion of this key north-south arterial into a multimodal complete street. – Unfortunately, barriers persist in the form of legacy infrastructure and successes have so far been limited. For this community to truly be connected to its nearby opportunities, the City of Houston is proposing the **Gulfton and Beyond Study**.

History

Gulfton is among Houston's newer communities and has been defined by a range of identities in its relatively short history. Platted in the 1950s after the construction of the Southwest Freeway (now Interstate 69), rapid expansion during the 1970s oil boom followed as scores of high-density apartments were built to house an influx of young professionals. This demographic makeup shifted abruptly in the early 1980s, as a sharp fall in oil prices resulted in an exodus of these high earners. In their place, immigrant families from Latin America and refugees from across the globe made their home in the relatively affordable apartments. Over the coming

decades, businesses, social service agencies, places of worship, and more were established to serve these populations, to support the diverse community that exists today.

Gulfton is among Houston’s most diverse communities. According to the US Census Bureau, fifty-nine percent of residents are foreign born, compared to 29% citywide. Sixty-nine percent of Gulfton residents are Hispanic, 14% are Black alone, 7% are Asian alone, and 8% are white. It is also one of Houston’s most socially vulnerable communities. The median income is \$26,042 – just 56% of the citywide median income – and 42% of residents live below the poverty line. Ninety-five percent of Gulfton residents rent their home, and over half of them pay more than 30% of their income to do so. As shown in Figure 3, 14 of the 15 census tracts in the study area are considered historically disadvantaged by FHWA.

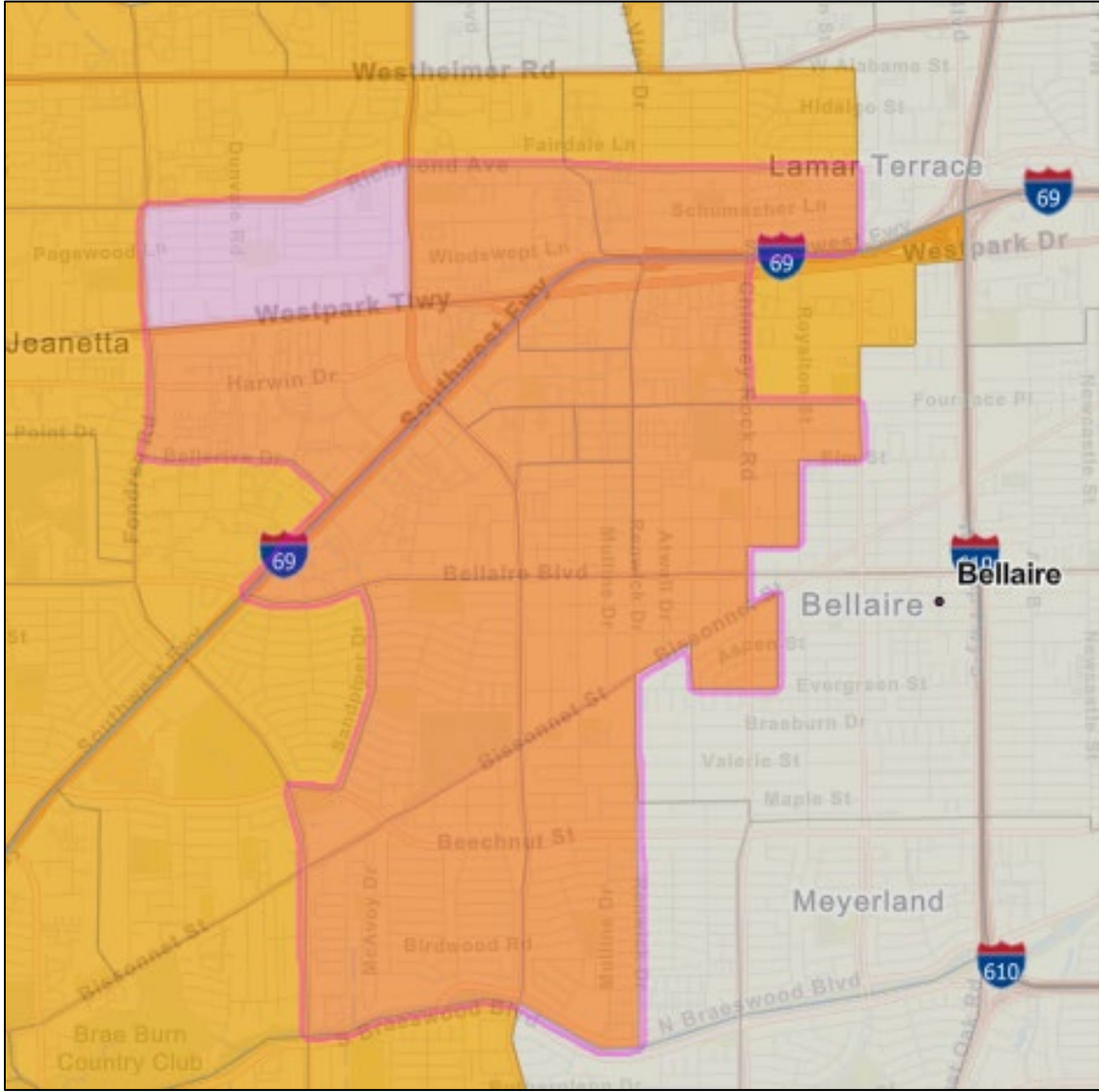


Figure 3: Of the 15 census tracts within the study area, 14 are considered historically disadvantaged by FHWA – including all within the Gulfton Super Neighborhood.

Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project

Gulfton's single-mode infrastructure is the source of mobility, health, and socioeconomic challenges. Over the past decade, non-profit groups have shone a light on the plights residents experience simply trying to get to work, school, or the grocery store, and the resulting long-term impacts on their wellbeing and finances. Studies conducted by the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, as well as the City of Houston's Complete Communities Action Plan helped bring attention to these issues and help spark a call to action.

In 2019, the City of Houston collaborated with Connect Community, a Gulfton-based nonprofit, and Together for Safer Roads, a global road safety NGO, on the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project. Working closely with community members, the project team reimaged this critical north/south axis as Gulfton's Main Street. Planners and engineers supervised a group of local high school interns to hold meetings, conduct field interviews, and design multimodal street improvements that were constructed the next year. This "Phase 1" project used a limited city budget to quickly establish connections between a few crucial destinations, including the Southwest Multi-Service Center, the Fiesta supermarket, and a dense cluster of apartments.

However, many other destinations requested by residents have not yet been connected to the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project and are separated from Gulfton by legacy infrastructure barriers. On the other side of Interstate 69 and just past the project's northern limit are several locations important to the Gulfton community: Wisdom High School, where most Gulfton teenagers attend; the Hillcroft Transit Center, where the fastest transit to Downtown is available; and the Mahatma Gandhi District, an eclectic cluster of restaurants and businesses where Gulfton residents work and shop. Beyond the project's southern limit and across multiple busy thoroughfares is the Brays Bayou Greenway Trail: a premier linear park over 30 miles long and a key corridor for both recreation and active transportation.

The City of Houston initiated design exercises to extend the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project, but have been unable to determine a straightforward solution. Intersecting facilities maintained by partner agencies like Interstate 69 (maintained by the Texas Department of Transportation) and the Westpark Tollway (maintained by the Harris County Toll Road Authority) present jurisdictional and technical challenges. Both of these partner agencies are supportive of the more comprehensive approach proposed through the Gulfton and Beyond study.

Upcoming Projects

In addition to the large existing roadways owned by external agencies, another upcoming project adds to the complexity of extending the Hillcroft Avenue project. The University Corridor Bus Rapid Transit project is currently in development by METRO (Houston's transit agency) to be constructed within an undeveloped ROW parallel to Westpark Drive. When complete, this project will further improve the speed, reliability, and range of destinations available at the Hillcroft Transit Center. However, the City of Houston is hesitant to plan an extension of the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project that will intersect a current project whose design is not completely certain. The Gulfton and Beyond study will give the City of Houston and partners like METRO an opportunity to plan these improvements in tandem, ensuring their compatibility and mutual benefit.

Gulfton and Beyond Study

To build off this previous work and address the challenges posed by legacy infrastructure, the City of Houston is seeking a Reconnecting Communities grant to fund a planning effort with the following deliverables:

- **Public and Stakeholder Engagement**
 - Steering committee
 - Stakeholder meetings and field interviews
 - Public meetings
 - Pop-up tactical urbanism event
 - Virtual public forum and social media campaign
 - Workshop Meetings

- **Existing Conditions Evaluation**
 - Existing conditions factbook
 - Online data dashboard
 - Shapefile format of data as available
 - Data appendix

- **Design and Analysis, including:**
 - At least 3 alternatives to extend the Hillcroft Avenue project north to Hillcroft Transit Center, Wisdom High School, and the Mahatma Gandhi commercial district, including safe and comfortable crossings of Interstate 69 and the Westpark Tollway
 - At least 2 alternatives to extend the Hillcroft Avenue project south to Brays Bayou Greenway Trail, including safe and comfortable routes and crossings of high-speed thoroughfares like Bellaire Boulevard and Bissonnet Street

Each alternative to include:

 - Schematic plan-view concept
 - Photo-realistic renderings by segment
 - Cross-section by segment
 - Access management plan
 - Drainage plan
 - Tree and landscape plan
 - Multimodal traffic impact analysis
 - Mode-shift and ridership analysis

- **Recommendation and Implementation Plan**
 - Based off technical analysis and stakeholder engagement, recommend at least one alternative each for both north and south extensions
 - Prepare materials necessary to move to capital construction phase, including schematic design and pre-engineering level cost estimate
 - Prepare funding strategy, including both USDOT Reconnecting Communities funds and other state, local and federal opportunities

The Gulfton and Beyond study has support from a wide range of stakeholders including community groups, partner agencies, and elected officials. Letters of support from the following individuals and groups are provided in the Appendix (with the exception of the Texas Department of Transportation, whose letter was sent directly to USDOT).

- U.S Representative Lizzie Fletcher (TX-7)
- Texas State Senator Borris Miles (District 13)
- Texas State Representative Gene Wu (District 147)
- City of Houston Council Member Edward Pollard (District J)
- City of Houston Council Member Tiffany Thomas (District F)
- Harris County Commissioner R. Jack Cagle (Precinct 4)
- Texas Department of Transportation [sent separately]
- Harris County Toll Road Authority
- Southwest Management District
- Gulfton Management District
- Gulfton Super Neighborhood Council
- Connect Community
- Air Alliance Houston
- BikeHouston
- LINK Houston
- Neighborhoods to Trails Southwest

B. LOCATION AND MAP

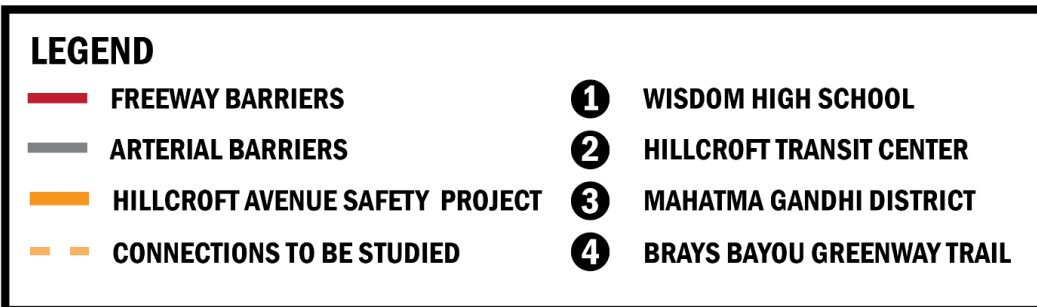


Figure 4: Gulfton and Beyond study area

C. RESPONSE TO MERIT CRITERIA

Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement

Gulfton residents have borne the brunt of the consequences of harmful transportation policy choices, particularly regarding street safety and environmental justice. Gulfton experiences a disproportionate rate of roadway death and serious injury. The existing crossings of Interstate 69 and the Westpark Tollway are among the most hazardous in the city. All are on the City of Houston's High Injury Network, the 6% of streets where 60% of roadway deaths and serious injuries occur. The intersection of Westpark Drive and the Interstate 69 Frontage Road is especially hazardous and was identified as one of Houston's 10 most dangerous intersections for pedestrians and cyclists through a citywide audit in 2018. The hazards on these roads result from historic transportation policy – specifically roadway design standards. The Gulfton and Beyond study will explore and recommend safety improvements at existing and new crossings to address the legacy of these policy choices.

Gulfton's infrastructure also leads to disproportionate levels of heat. Through the 2020 Houston Heat Watch campaign, Gulfton was identified as the hottest neighborhood in Harris County, experiencing temperatures 17 degrees higher than the coolest neighborhood. According to the Greener Gulfton report¹, these impacts can be attributed to large expanses of concrete and minimal vegetation present in its car-centric transportation infrastructure.

Through the Gulfton and Beyond study, the City of Houston will work directly with community members to address these issues on their terms. The study will continue and expand the meaningful, community-centered engagement approach taken during the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project. As with that effort, residents and community leaders will guide the City of Houston in the study's development. A steering committee comprised of representatives from locally based nonprofits and civic groups will be established in an advisory role. More critically, Gulfton residents will be hired to conduct field interviews and help technical staff synthesize that feedback towards robust recommendations.

Mobility and Community Connectivity

Interstate 69 and the Westpark Tollway act as large concrete walls along Gulfton's north and west borders. Residents wishing to connect to locations north are limited to just two crossings, both of which present serious hazards. This infrastructure is particularly poorly suited to Gulfton given its residents' reliance on walking, biking, and public transit. Walking from apartment complexes as little as 1,000 ft away to the Hillcroft Transit Center requires travelling over twice that distance, crossing multiple lanes of high-speed traffic, and for those compelled to risk it, walking in the roadway itself (see Figure 5). Residents wishing to connect from Gulfton south to the Brays Bayou Greenway Trail encounter similar barriers in the form of arterial roadways. Multilane thoroughfares like Bellaire Boulevard and Beechnut Street obstruct safe access to one of the City's premier trails.

¹ https://cdn.hpm.io/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/12152451/Greener-Gulfton-Community-Summary_English.pdf



Figure 5: Distance as-the-crow-flies between Bella Luna Apartments to Hillcroft Transit Center compared with existing walking route

The Gulfton and Beyond study will propose comprehensive solutions to these barriers. Existing crossings will be evaluated for potential reconfiguration and new crossings will be explored to provide safe and comfortable access for people walking or rolling from Hillcroft Avenue to destinations north and south.

Multiple previous feasibility studies have identified the need for these connections and laid the groundwork for the Gulfton and Beyond study. The following plans and reports have recommended connections between Gulfton and destinations separated by infrastructure barriers:

- City of Houston: Gulfton Complete Communities Action Plan²
- METRO: Hillcroft TC Vision and Implementation Plan³; University Corridor BRT⁴
- Kinder Institute for Urban Research: Planning From Inside Out: Using Community Responses to Address Transportation, Infrastructure and Safety Concerns⁵; Safe Streets, Safe Communities: Walking and Biking Infrastructure in Gulfton⁶
- Houston-Galveston Area Council: Brays Oaks Livable Centers Study⁷

The Gulfton and Beyond study will take these recommendations and develop them into detailed alternatives to comprehensively address the barriers presented by Interstate 69, the Westpark Tollway, and other high-speed roadways.

² https://www.houstontx.gov/completenesscommunities/docs_pdfs/Gulfton/gulfton-cc-action-plan.pdf

³ Hillcroft Transit Center: Vision and Implementation Plan, METRO, April 2020

⁴ <https://www.ridemetro.org/Pages/METROrapid-University-Corridor-Project.aspx>

⁵ <https://kinder.rice.edu/research/planning-inside-out-using-community-responses-address-transportation-infrastructure-and>

⁶ <https://kinder.rice.edu/research/safe-streets-safe-communities-walking-and-biking-infrastructure-gulfton>

⁷ https://www.h-gac.com/getmedia/3c907d2f-6b5d-4e78-9171-94d6b9f36a45/Brays-Oaks-Livable-Centers-Study_Final-Document-with-Appendices

Multiple projects, both recently completed and upcoming, are expanding Gulfton’s access to active, affordable, and sustainable transportation options. The first phase of the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project provides high-comfort bikeways, safe crossings, and improved transit stops along roughly 1 mile of Gulfton streets. METRO’s upcoming University Corridor BRT is planned to stop at the Hillcroft Transit Center and will provide frequent, fast, and reliable transit service between that station and destinations throughout the region. The Gulfton and Beyond Study will design detailed proposals to ensure these projects are seamlessly connected and provide active, affordable, and sustainable transportation options for Gulfton residents.

The Gulfton and Beyond study will ensure this transportation network increases community resilience as well by incorporating recommendations from the Greener Gulfton report. This recently completed interdisciplinary planning effort explores Gulfton’s challenges and needs around nature, health, and resilience, and recommends strategies to address them. The Gulfton and Beyond study will evaluate opportunities to implement these environmental recommendations alongside efforts to improve mobility.

The crossings of Interstate 69, the Westpark Tollway, and other high-speed arterials need to be rebuilt to meet current multimodal design standards. Some locations are slated to be reconstructed as part of METRO’s University Corridor BRT project, and the Gulfton and Beyond study will expand this scope to include all crossings that currently impede Gulfton residents’ mobility.



Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships

The Gulfton and Beyond study will continue and expand the meaningful, community-centered engagement approach taken during the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project. As with that effort, residents and community leaders will guide the City of Houston in the study’s development. This includes a community advisory group in the form of a steering committee comprised of representatives from locally based nonprofits and civic groups. This also includes formal partnerships: Gulfton residents will be hired to conduct field interviews and help technical staff synthesize that feedback towards robust recommendations.

Figure 6: High School safety interns interview residents about their experiences navigating Gulfton’s streets (Source: Connect Community)

Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity

The Gulfton Complete Communities Action Plan provides a comprehensive framework to support the Reconnecting Communities study, including community-vetted recommendations across Civic Engagement, Economy and Jobs, Education, Health, Housing, Mobility and Infrastructure, Neighborhood Character, Parks and Community Amenities, and Safety. These strategies are being advanced across the City of Houston’s departments and partner agencies and organizations and will help support the Gulfton and Beyond study.

As recommended by this study and the Hillcroft Avenue Safety Project, the City of Houston is implementing creative place-making in Gulfton. Partnering with local artists, the City of Houston implemented a community led design for asphalt art at the intersection of Hillcroft, High Star, and Westward. The Gulfton and Beyond study will explore future opportunities to implement creative place-making within its broader mobility recommendations.

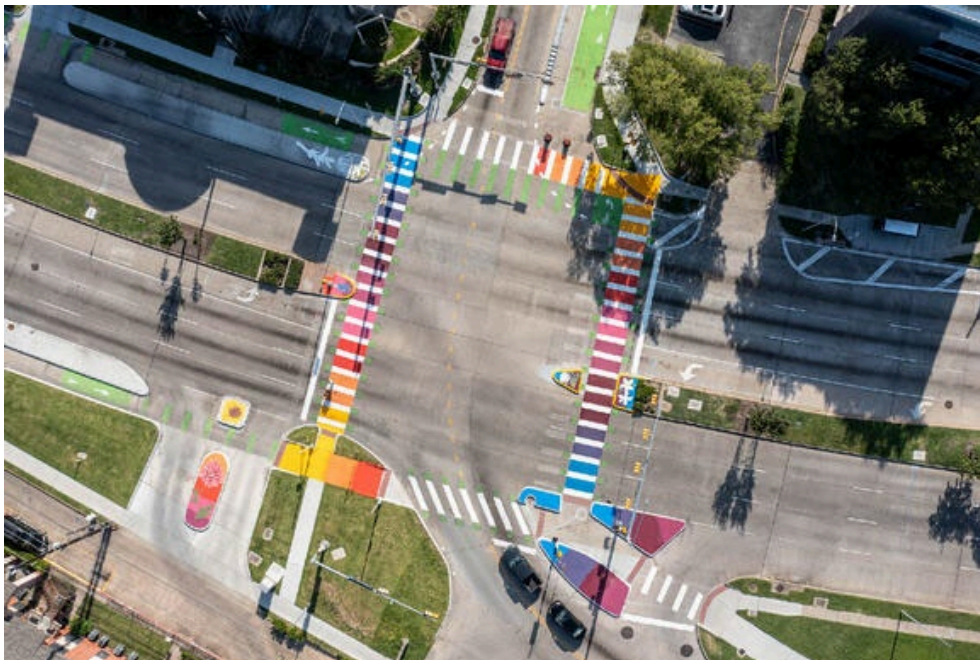


Figure 7: Hillcroft Street at High Star Road and Westward Street (*Source: UP Art Studio*)

The City of Houston is committed to ensuring racial equity in the delivery and implementation of the Project. The City has conducted racial equity disparity studies, which revealed significant systemic disparities in all levels of procurement. To remediate these disparities, the City implemented comprehensive contracting measures including Hire Houston First and Pay or Play. These City policies aim to level the playing field in its procurement practices. Core functions that advance the mission of racial equity in hiring includes City certifications of Minority Business Enterprises (MBE), Women Business Enterprises (WBE), Small Business Enterprises (SBE), LGBT Business Enterprises (LGBTBE), Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBE), and Persons with Disabilities Business Enterprises (PDBE). In fiscal year 2021, HPW awarded \$897 million, of which \$237 million or 26.5% was awarded to certified Small/Minority/Women – Owned Business Enterprises. These efforts earned Houston Public Works (HPW) recognition as the City Department of the Year at the Champions of Diversity Awards.