

Issue 13: Facility Review – Houston Regional Office (R12)

A. Brief Identification of Issue

The Elias Ramirez State Office Building (ERB) which currently houses TCEQ's Houston Regional Office (R12), is not an adequate facility to support TCEQ's mission-critical compliance and disaster emergency response field activities.

B. Discussion

Houston is the fourth largest city in the U.S. with a population exceeding two million and is situated in Harris County with a total population of over four million. Overall, the greater Houston area is home to more than seven million people with a large, diverse, and complex universe of entities regulated by TCEQ.

The boundaries of TCEQ R12 include four deep water ports and two shallow ports. The Houston Ship Channel is a 52-mile waterway where more than 330 public and private terminals operate, which are owned by more than 150 companies. Many of those companies are subject to TCEQ regulations. The Port of Houston is the largest port in Texas, the largest port in the U.S in foreign and domestic waterborne tonnage, and is ranked third among U.S. ports in terms of total foreign cargo. The Houston Ship Channel is also reported to be the largest U.S. petrochemical complex allowing Houston to account for 42% of the nation's base petrochemical capacity.

Because of the large number of industrial facilities, as well as the proximity to the Texas Gulf of Mexico, TCEQ has been at the forefront of disaster and emergency response activities in this region, such as Hurricane Harvey and incidents at major facilities including the Intercontinental Terminals Company fire in Deer Park, Texas.

R12 operates from the ERB, a state-owned building located at 5425 Polk Street, Houston, Texas. TCEQ is the second largest tenant in the ERB, with approximately 200 employees. The ERB was completed in 1942 and the current condition of facilities are inadequate for TCEQ's operational needs. TCEQ has occupied the ERB since the mid-1990s with minimal improvements. Recurring facility issues include electrical problems, roof and window leaks resulting in water damage, mold remediation, elevators that often are inoperable but which are needed to move field equipment and sample containers, insufficient custodial services, and rodent intrusion. ERB's parking capacity is severely limited, providing a total of only 634 spaces to be utilized by both the public and the more than 900 staff employed by the 11 state agency tenants. Seventy-four of the total parking spaces are reserved for state agency vehicles, of which R12 has over 60.

The lack of 24-hour security and overall inadequate fencing, drainage, and lighting of the parking areas adjacent to the building prohibit TCEQ from stationing additional equipment at R12 since trespassing, thefts, and vandalism occurs routinely. Although TFC converted to a new security card access system for the building in FY 2021, 24-hour security is not provided for the ERB or parking areas. TCEQ has consistently raised security concerns with TFC and requested a security survey be conducted. In August 2019, TFC's Security and Safety Office conducted the survey and multiple security risks were identified, however, these risks have remained largely unaddressed. As a result, TCEQ initiated and funded the reinstallation of security card access gates, as well as replacement of inoperable security cameras both internally and externally to ERB.

Aside from the lack of adequate security and safety, the ERB is not conducive for allowing R12 to expand regulatory and incident response capabilities. For example, the fire and safety codes for ERB limit R12's capacity for maintaining the chemicals and gases used in equipment calibration. Additionally, the demands for physical space and limited electrical/network lines impede R12's process for conducting routine equipment preparation, calibration, and storage, as well as accommodating additional equipment and staff dedicated to disaster response activities. High value assets, such as mobile monitoring vans used in emergency response events, cannot currently be stationed and secured in the parking area at R12. Although TCEQ received \$890,000 in legislative funding for the FY 2022-2023 biennium to address antiquated and unsafe conditions at ERB, this interim measure does not fully address R12's existing or future business needs for this facility.

C. Potential Solutions and Impact

TCEQ recommends consideration be given for R12 to be housed in an accessible, secure location with appropriately configured space. While TCEQ recognizes the possibility of ongoing financial costs in relocating R12 from a state-owned building to a commercial lease, the financial cost must be evaluated equally with TCEQ's ability to effectively and efficiently conduct mission critical responsibilities to serve the public in this region of the state. If approved, TCEQ, in consultation with TFC, would acquire professional services to identify and analyze potential sites and would then make the best value decision that syncs with agency responsibilities. TCEQ anticipates making a legislative appropriation request to fund this recommendation.