Pasadena Citizens' Advisory Council

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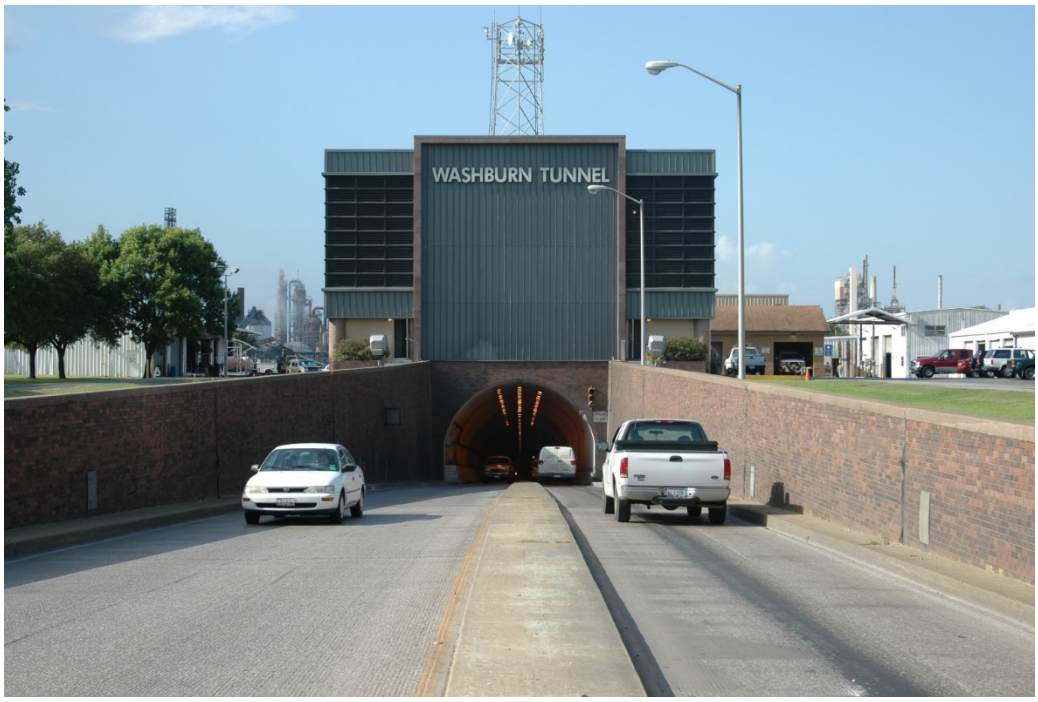
Summary of
Thursday, March 22, 2018 Meeting

WASHBURN TUNNEL HISTORY, OPERATIONS AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The Washburn Tunnel provides one of three ways to cross the Houston Ship Channel. Located between the Loop 610 Bridge in Manchester and the Fred Hartmann Bridge in Baytown, the two-lane underwater tunnel connects Pasadena and Galena Park. Pasadena Citizens' Advisory Council (PCAC) members drive the tunnel often. Realizing that most know little about it, they invited Harris County Pct. 2 Tunnel Superintendent Jacque Darbonne to talk about its history and operations. Because there are plants very close to the tunnel, members also wanted to learn how nearby plants communicate with the tunnel in a significant event.



Darbonne said construction on the tunnel began in late 1947. Several PCAC members recall watching the construction when they were young. One remembered her brother earning money for school by hauling bricks used in its construction. The tunnel opened in May 1950. One of the PCAC members was in the junior high band that played for the opening.

Many members found Darbonne's description of the 6-foot high service tunnel most interesting. He said the service tunnel under the roadway houses the forced air ventilation system, pumps to remove water, and electrical systems. The redundant electrical systems are designed to prevent a total black out within the tunnel, and an uninterrupted power device provides 30 minutes of lights so the tunnel can be evacuated if needed. In addition, the tunnel has a back-up generator that has to be manually engaged.

Darbonne indicated that about 50 people may be on "site" at any one time so communications with Pasadena Refining and other surrounding entities during an emergency is critical. There is a guard shack right next to the refinery. Ronald Sommers, Chief of Emergency Services at Pasadena Refining System Inc. said the facility has worked to improve the timeliness of its communications with the tunnel. The refinery is located on both sides of the tunnel. To make communications work well, Sommers has emphasized building relationships with Darbonne as well as the City of Pasadena. Knowing each other and having each other's phone numbers handy is important when communication must be quick.

Members wondered if it was possible for a ship to hit the top of the tunnel as it sailed over it. Darbonne said there is 10-15 feet between the top of the tunnel and the bed of the ship channel. Damage to the inside of the tunnel has been reduced by restricting truck traffic. Members learned that in a major industrial emergency, the tunnel can be closed to traffic temporarily so that emergency vehicles may be moved from one side of the ship channel to where they are needed to fight a fire, for example.

Photos of tunnel may be found in the attached slides.

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