

WAP – Heyden Black Walker

Overview

Our family firm, Black + Vernooy Architecture and Urban Design supports a number of local efforts to improve walkability in Austin, Texas. Our goal is to both improve walkability in Austin and to share those best practices / successes with other communities. Our biggest advocacy effort for the last 4 years has been [Reconnect Austin](#), an effort to convince the Texas Department of Transportation that they should be considering walkability, transit, economic development, and urban design as they consider a rebuild of Interstate 35 in Austin.

Black + Vernooy is best known for our role in writing Austin's Great Streets Master Plan (2001) and overseeing the early implementation of that master plan. We created an [e-book](#) to help document both how Austin's downtown streets are being reprioritized for people, as well as the many advantages of creating streets that function as quality, walkable urban spaces. We are also known for our continuing support of making Austin more walkable through our building designs; plus work with grassroots groups, city boards and councils, and professional organizations.

This WAP is broken up into two parts: the short term focus on completing our work on I-35 through Reconnect Austin, and the long term focus on creating a business model that allows us to continue our current work and advocacy.

The decisions around I-35 will be finalized by fall 2018, after the Record of Decision and final public hearing there will no longer be opportunities to influence the design decisions. I am looking at the short term efforts (next 2 years) that can make a difference in how I-35 is designed through Austin. I am also planning for business changes I need to put in place in order to continue our design and advocacy efforts for the long term.

Short Term Goal: Continue and expand campaign for Reconnect Austin

For the last four years I have directed a grassroots effort to help citizens and community groups understand the various opportunities to benefit our local community when the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) adds managed lanes to Interstate 35 (I-35) through Austin. It is difficult for people to understand the concepts of induced demand, that highways are not actually free, that the State of Texas and Federal government have very different priorities from local residents, and that they have no meaningful vote in this decision-making process. TxDOT regularly tells the public that they cannot build their way out of congestion, but they are going to spend \$4.6 billion trying.

This campaign will continue to monitor current plans for I-35 and continue to work to get citizens and political leadership engaged. TxDOT has initiated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review. Unfortunately, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has ceded their environmental review authority to TxDOT, which means TxDOT creates the project, hires a local company to conduct the environmental review, then approves the review of their own project, with only periodic checks from FHWA. Local public agencies are so convinced that the process is pre-determined that they did not even participate in the recent open public comment period. TxDOT expects to complete an Environmental Assessment (EA), rather than

the more comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement, and wrap up the review in August 2018.

I-35 slices through the urban core of Austin, creating a barrier between neighborhoods. There are multiple areas where highly walkable, older neighborhoods adjacent to I-35 are disconnected from each other because the highway lanes are impossible to cross, bridges and underpasses are infrequent, and both bridges and underpasses have narrow (if any sidewalks) right next to high-speed traffic. As with most cities, I-35 was intentionally used to wall off minority neighborhoods, physically reinforcing Austin's racist 1929 plan which forced minority populations into one geographic area, now called East Austin. Many of those neighborhoods are now changing with the forces of gentrification. Some long term residents prefer the damage I-35 does to their neighborhoods because they believe depressed property values will help slow down displacement.

TxDOT will spend \$4.6 billion adding new managed lanes on I-35 from Georgetown to San Marcos, Texas. Austin's downtown, state offices, hospitals, urban neighborhoods, and the University of Texas at Austin are all adjacent to this highway. These areas are all very walkable neighborhoods, but they are disconnected by the barrier that is I-35. TxDOT will rebuild frontage roads, general purpose lanes, add managed lanes, add auxiliary lanes, and rebuild every single existing bridge in the urban core. This project is being sold as a transit project, because buses will be allowed to operate free of charge in the managed lanes. That claim is simply "transit washing" if there is not a comprehensive look at each component necessary for transit to be successful (currently there is not) and these walkable areas are not stitched back together across the I-35 barrier. USDOT's Reconnecting Communities, Ladders of Opportunity, and Every Place Counts programs recognize this, but that message has not reached TxDOT.

Because of the massive scope of this project, especially in Austin's urban core, this project represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to reconnect neighborhoods that enjoyed walkability and access before I-35 was constructed in the early 1950's. While the City of Austin prioritizes access, our adopted comprehensive plan that envisions a "compacted and connected" community fabric, this project is being directed by TxDOT, who sees their mission as mobility (the whole effort is named "Mobility35"). Mobility is about prioritizing the long distance vehicular trip and pushing as much traffic through the city as quickly as possible. The goal is moving quickly through the city, not accessing destinations within the city.

Existing bridges and frontage roads were not built for people and are deadly for many who try to walk there. In 2015 17% of Austin's 102 traffic fatalities occurred in the I-35 corridor. TxDOT claims safety as their primary mission, but still does not recognize the design choices that impact residents with deadly results. The current target design speeds for the frontage roads adjacent to downtown are 35 mph, while for the remainder of the city the frontage road target design speed is 50 mph. There is little recognition that residents live, work, and walk along these frontage roads.

The Reconnect Austin campaign will be built around the NEPA schedule and coordinated with other partners in the community. Immediate, on-going efforts are:

ACTION	STATUS
Work with local activists, community groups, and neighborhood groups to request a 90 day extension of the 14 day public comment period (ending 10/4/16).	Complete – public comment period was extended to 10/19/16.
Work with Austin Chamber of Commerce, Austin Real Estate Council, and Downtown Austin Alliance to ensure over 1,000 letters requesting that I-35 be lowered below grade in downtown Austin are submitted to TxDOT.	Complete – over 2,500 letter delivered
Work with local City Council members and Texas Legislative representatives to highlight the excessive design speeds of 50 mph for the frontage roads.	Step one complete – testified to Austin City Council Continue to work with Council staff members on Resolution directing city staff to address
Work with local City Council members to direct City of Austin staff to actively monitor TxDOT’s designs for I-35 and identify where those designs conflict with existing City of Austin adopted policy. Adopted City of Austin plans that conflict with current TxDOT I—35 designs include: Urban Design Standards, Complete Street Policy, Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan, Mayor's Challenge for Safer People Safer Streets, Great Streets Policy, and Vision Zero Action Plan.	Step one complete – 12 letters to TxDOT during open comment period from community groups and City of Austin Boards/Councils highlighted these concerns. Continue to work with Council staff members on Resolution directing city staff to address
Work with the local chapters of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) and Real Estate Council (RECA) to hold a ULI Technical Assistance Panel, bringing in national level expertise and best practice, for January 2017	Step one complete – initial conference calls have been positive. Next steps: Forward documentation of concerns in letter submitted to TxDOT. Schedule follow up conference call for 1 st week of November. Get a date and funding commitment from ULI.

We will continue to work with our community partners:

- The Congress for the New Urbanism, Central Texas Chapter
- The Congress for the New Urbanism, Highways to Boulevard Program
- AURA (local urbanists)
- The Urban Land Institute, Austin Chapter
- Downtown Austin Alliance (PID)
- East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood Association
- Downtown Austin Neighborhood Association
- NCINC2 (coalition of 11 neighborhood Associations along the I-35 corridor)

- OCEAN (coalition of 5 neighborhood Associations along the I-35 corridor)
- City of Austin Pedestrian Advisory Council
- City of Austin Bicycle Advisory Council
- Bike Austin
- Walk Austin
- Vision Zero ATX
- Reconnect Austin Strategy Team
- Reconnect Austin Advisory Board

The long term, overall goal of this work is to make the I-35 corridor as walkable as possible. Realistically, because of strong political momentum and a local fear of traffic congestion, it is unlikely local advocates can completely stop this project from going forward. Therefore, the long term goal is to reconnect as much of Austin as possible, making it safe, comfortable, and walkable. A critical part of the campaign continues to be to convince decision makers that we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to get this right.

Long Term Goal: Formalize our business structure so that we can continue to support both Reconnect Austin and promote place making, urban design, and walkability

Our small family-owned business, currently a sole proprietorship, supports a variety of local organizations, many of which we actually supported through their formation and continue to serve in leadership positions. These professional and grassroots groups, include:

- Congress for the New Urbanism, Central Texas Chapter
- Vision Zero ATX
- American Institute of Architects, Urban Design Committee
- Strong Towns – Central Texas
- City of Austin Pedestrian Advisory Council
- City of Austin Design Commission
- Walk Austin
- Trail Dawgs

While we have spearheaded better walkability for the last 40 years, and are known in Austin as strong advocates, we have frequently not been paid for our efforts. We have to figure out how to change that paradigm if we are going to continue this work.

At a minimum we need to bring many of our efforts under one umbrella and consolidate social media, websites, and public facing efforts. We need a business plan that outlines our goals, our target clients, and our transition plan.

So far, my research has led to meetings with:

- Miller Nuttle, Bike Austin
- Justin Golbabai, City of Austin Neighborhood Partnering Program
- Joel Meyer, City of Austin Pedestrian Coordinator
- Laura Dierenfield, City of Austin Active Transportation Director

- Robert Anderson, Walk Austin
- Ted Siff, Shoal Creek Conservancy
- Peter Mullen, Waller Creek Conservancy
- Michael Gaudini, Austin City Council Office District 7
- Steven Zettner, Sustainable Neighborhoods

I have had mentoring calls with:

- Jonathon Stalls, Walk 2 Connect
- Robert Ping, Walkable and Livable Communities
- Joyce Hussein, Walk College 2015
- Wendy Landman, Walk Boston

Upcoming meetings / calls are scheduled with:

- Mark Fenton
- Amir Emamian, City of Austin Safe Routes to School
- Robin Stallings, Bike Texas
- Francis Riley, City of Austin Vision Zero Coordinator

I have also attended small business / non-profit classes at the local SCORE chapter, and the City of Austin Small Business Development Department. I have looked at non-profit, for profit, and organizations that share traits of both. Given the research and discussion, I believe the best model going forward will be an LLC, structured so that we can certify with the City of Austin and State of Texas as a Woman Owned Small Business. Several meetings with City of Austin staff have started to identify areas where we may be able to partner on place making and walkability projects.

Our most complex advocacy project, which we manage in-house, is Reconnect Austin. This will need to be incorporated as a Texas non-profit. We are currently researching out to local non-profits that share our mission and already have a 501C3 designation, to act as our fiscal sponsor. This seems the best approach given that we know the Reconnect Austin efforts will likely end with the Record of Decision in the fall of 2018.

Creating these entities will allow us the flexibility to continue working for better walkability in Austin and, hopefully bring those best practices to other communities. The walking movement has coalesced rapidly in Austin, with a Complete Streets Policy in place, a Great Streets Master Plan for downtown, an adopted Vision Zero policy, the beginning efforts to write the Austin Pedestrian Safety Action Plan and the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan, and strong community conversation regarding highways in urban areas and a very active Pedestrian Advisory Council. Austin is a classic sunbelt city that can be a strong example to other communities working to improve walkability.

