



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Mayor and City Council

**FROM:** Gina Fiandaca  
Assistant City Manager, City of Austin

Tucker Ferguson, P.E., Austin District Engineer, Texas Department of Transportation

**DATE:** November 16, 2022

**SUBJECT:** I-35 Projects and Texas Department of Transportation Coordination Update

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The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update from the City of Austin and Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) mobility teams on activities related to TxDOT's I-35 Capital Express Central Project.

### I-35 Capital Express Central Project

#### **Purpose and Need of the Project**

The [I-35 Capital Express Central project](#) is in the environmental study and design phase, with construction anticipated to begin in summer 2024. The project is approximately eight (8) miles along I-35 between US 290 East and SH 71/Ben White Boulevard in the central region of the Austin metropolitan area. The proposed project is needed because I-35 between US 290 East and US 290 West/SH 71 does not adequately accommodate current and future travel demand and does not meet current federal and state design standards, which has resulted in safety and operational deficiencies and can impact crash rates and peak period travel times for all users, including emergency response vehicles and transit.

The purpose of the proposed project is to improve this critical local, regional, national, and international thoroughfare by enhancing safety within the corridor; addressing demand by prioritizing the movement of people, goods, and services through and across the corridor; improving operational efficiency; and creating a more dependable and consistent route for the traveling public, including bicyclists, pedestrians, emergency responders, and transit. The proposed improvements and design alternatives include:

- Adding two non-tolled HOV managed lanes in each direction along I-35 from US 290 East to SH 71/Ben White Boulevard.
- Removing the existing I-35 upper decks and lowering the roadway.
- Constructing more than 16 miles of new shared-use paths on both sides of I-35.
- Adding vehicle bypass lanes to reduce through-car traffic at intersections.
- Providing 13 connections to urban trail and bicycle networks.
- Widening 13 existing east-west crossings to include 30 additional feet on each side for buffers, shared-use paths, sidewalks and/or plantings.

- Constructing new bicycle-pedestrian crossings at 5th Street, 51st Street, Red Line at Airport Boulevard, and Lady Bird Lake.
- Adding bicycle-pedestrian crossings at 3rd Street, 15th Street and MLK Blvd proposed in Modified Alternative 3.
- Providing additional safety and mobility improvements.

The Austin Transportation Department (ATD) leads the ongoing I-35 Capital Express Central project engineering and technical coordination with TxDOT's Austin District Office to ensure that optimization of the local transportation network are addressed, given the design alternatives under consideration through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) clearance process. In addition, ATD is coordinating with TxDOT on traffic control and construction management approaches to mitigate impacts during construction.

### **Project Status**

In August 2022, TxDOT transitioned from schematic design efforts into environmental studies of the proposed alternatives, along with no-build, as required by the federal NEPA clearance process, with staff concentrating on the analysis and evaluation of an array of environmental and community impacts and benefits, including:

- Land use, right-of-way, displacements.
- Utility relocation.
- Bicycle and pedestrian paths.
- Visual/aesthetic impacts.
- Community resources (impacts to residents, businesses, community facilities, environmental justice populations, changes in community cohesion, and changes in access and travel patterns).
- Air quality.
- Traffic noise.
- Biological resources (vegetation and wildlife, threatened, endangered, and rare species).
- Water resources.
- Protected lands (parks and historic sites).
- Hazardous materials.
- Cultural resources (historic sites, archeological resources, cemeteries).
- Cumulative impacts.
- Greenhouse gas, climate change.

TxDOT is on schedule to release the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in early 2023. TxDOT is undertaking the most rigorous level of environmental analysis, under NEPA, with the development of a federal EIS. Potential impacts on the human and natural environment that could result from the proposed build alternatives (Alternative 2 and Modified Alternative 3) and no-build alternative are being evaluated as part of the EIS. The draft EIS public review process includes a 60-day public comment period, with resources available online, in local libraries, and through the required public hearing.

Though environmental studies are being performed on the April design schematics, ATD and TxDOT have continued to work through design refinements for the alternatives, including bicycle and pedestrian connectivity and frontage road intersection geometry and operations. ATD will also review the draft EIS along with all City Departments and submit written comments to TxDOT during the public comment period.

Once TxDOT has received and reviewed all comments submitted through the public review process for the draft EIS, TxDOT will analyze the feedback received from public comments as well as input from ongoing City coordination efforts and will propose appropriate design adjustments. TxDOT and the City will continue coordination in good faith through ongoing workshops and reviews, focusing on the designs, aesthetics, capital construction, and maintenance items.

### **Community Engagement**

Public involvement and feedback remain critical to design development as the I-35 Capital Express Central project moves forward. Community outreach methods include topic-based VOICE (Volunteer Opportunity in Community Engagement) meetings, agency coordination workshops, as well as in-person and virtual meetings with community members, businesses, elected officials, and various public and private organizations. To date, over 18,000 total participated in virtual and in-person meetings.

### **Next Steps for I-35 Capital Express Central**

TxDOT is on track to present the draft EIS and preferred alternative, followed by a robust public engagement process in early 2023. Other public engagement opportunities include upcoming VOICE aesthetics meetings featuring concepts from Riverside Drive to SH 71/Ben White Boulevard and from Riverside Drive to US 290 East.

TxDOT anticipates completing the combined final EIS and Record of Decision in the summer of 2023. TxDOT and the City of Austin will continue conducting joint technical focus workshops throughout project development to finalize the design, alternative selection, aesthetics, and maintenance needs. This early coordination is critical in supporting the City's efforts to fund construction and maintenance of public spaces and widened crossings.

### **Our Future 35: Cap and Stitch Program Update**

#### **Purpose and Need of the Program**

The [Our Future 35: Cap and Stitch Program](#) (Our Future 35) is leveraging the opportunity presented by TxDOT's I-35 Capital Express Central Project to provide Austin community benefits through creating and funding a series of public spaces (caps) and widened crossings (stitches) over the Capital Express Central project improvements that will place highway lanes through downtown below street level.

The Corridor Program Office (CPO), in partnership with the Downtown Austin Alliance, is leading the Our Future 35: Cap and Stitch Program (Our Future 35), including ongoing community engagement, preliminary design work, and engineering and technical coordination with TxDOT's Austin District Office.

Our Future 35 will provide safer and more connected avenues to everyday destinations like healthcare facilities, schools, and jobs; provide public spaces and facilities for outdoor activities and public events; and several other benefits to Austin and the local communities that have been most impacted by the legacy of segregation and division reinforced by the current I-35 configuration.

Final cap and stitch locations selection, amenities development, and design integration into the I-35 Capital Express Central project will occur as TxDOT's draft EIS and NEPA process results become available and through continued coordination.

## **Program Status**

In spring 2022, the team completed the Engineering Feasibility Study, which evaluated whether the program was structurally feasible within the interstate's infrastructure. The results concluded that many open spaces and park features are possible on new freeway caps, and one- or two-story buildings are feasible under particular circumstances.

In May 2022, Our Future 35's multi-disciplinary design and engineering team kicked off Phase 1 of design by developing a community-supported design and programming concept for caps and stitches over I-35. This phase of work builds upon the analysis from the Engineering Feasibility Study and will include subsequent phases of work to develop cap and stitch concepts with the community and to identify a community preferred design concept to advance into schematic design.

The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), comprised of representatives from several City departments, convened for a kickoff meeting in August 2022. The TAC will engage on an as-needed basis to provide technical guidance on various program elements.

Now under development in partnership with the Austin Economic Development Corporation (AEDC), the Equitable Development Strategy will ensure that new freeway caps and stitches benefit the surrounding neighborhoods and do not aggravate neighborhood pressures. Anticipated to be complete in 2023, the strategy's focus areas include affordable housing, anti-displacement, community development needs, small business support and incubation, and workforce development. Our Future 35, the TAC, and the Community Steering Committee will co-develop the public engagement process.

In March 2022, through sponsorship from Congressman Lloyd Doggett, the City was awarded \$1.5 million in Community Project Funding as part of the FY22 Omnibus Appropriations Act to support Our Future 35 project planning and development activities. Our Future 35 is also developing a City-led funding strategy for constructing the new caps and stitches and ongoing maintenance and operational needs. Coordination with private, local, state, and federal partners continues to be a key focus area for identifying potential funding strategies. We anticipate having draft funding scenarios and recommendations in spring 2023.

In October 2022, Our Future 35 submitted a grant application for \$1.12 million from the US Department of Transportation (USDOT) Reconnecting Communities Planning Grant funds. If awarded, the funds will be used for the Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study to identify equitable multimodal transportation improvements and community connections. USDOT will announce the grant awards in early 2023. Following the grant application submittal, City leadership conducted an advocacy trip to Washington, D.C., to discuss funding opportunities for Our Future 35 with legislators, the USDOT, and the Build America Bureau.

## **Community Engagement**

Our Future 35 held a public open house in August 2022 to solicit feedback from the community on the vision and goals of Our Future 35 and receive preliminary ideas of what features and amenities they desire along the caps and stitches. Additionally, Our Future 35 provided a virtual open house and survey for those unable to attend the event.

The team also held the kickoff meeting for the Community Steering Committee, a 15-member elected committee that will help shape the program's efforts and ensure that designs reflect community values. The Community Steering Committee will review the project team's community involvement and outreach strategies and help develop concepts and designs that best reflect identified community priorities.

The project team has also developed a new website that provides additional information about the Our Future 35 Program and recent activities. The website is [www.AustinTexas.gov/OurFuture35](http://www.AustinTexas.gov/OurFuture35).

### **Next Steps for Our Future 35**

In winter 2022, Our Future 35 team will release the open house report and the draft Vision and Goals for public feedback. Shortly after, the TAC and Steering Committee will coordinate with the project team to co-develop the Opportunities and Constraints for the program and release them for public comment as well.

Our Future 35 will also continue to regularly engage the public about the status and aims of the program through:

- Education and awareness campaign via the CPO Facebook and Twitter platforms.
- Community-wide open house events (both in-person and virtual).
- Announcements released about public participation opportunities via the program email list, website, social media, and media channels.

Our Future 35 will hold a series of topic-specific open houses and focus groups on evaluating design alternatives, equity strategies, and a draft preferred concept. The conceptual design alternatives will be co-created with TAC and Community Steering Committee members beginning in early 2023. The project team will submit structural load requirements to TxDOT in spring 2023.

To move forward in design and engineering, a community-selected concept will be confirmed in 2023. The program will complete engineering and design plans in late 2025 to align with TxDOT's I-35 Capital Express Central project timeline.

### **Continued Regional Partnership on a Coordinated Construction Strategy**

The Central Texas community will experience considerable construction in the coming decade, including I-35 (TxDOT), Project Connect (Austin Transit Partnership), the Corridor Construction Program (City of Austin), and US 183 North and South MoPac (Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority), as well as other significant private and public projects. A higher-than-typical degree of coordination across the Central Texas region is required to lessen potential impacts on mobility in larger areas beyond any individual project's footprint. The City and TxDOT are committed to keeping Central Texas thriving, accessible, and informed during this unprecedented level of construction by continuing close collaboration through the multi-agency team working to develop and implement a coordinated strategy to reduce impacts on our community.

Further updates to Austin City Council and the public are planned after the release of the draft EIS in early 2023. Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

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