Taylor's Path

Issue Statement

Austin is positioned to make historic investments in creating a more affordable and connected community. These investments have the power to either reconcile systemic underinvestment in historically marginalized communities or continue to perpetuate spatial and social injustices within our built environment. The public space between buildings and roads - the pedestrian realm - is largely where these injustices play out day-to-day. Inadequate public access networks in an auto-dependent environment leads to disproportionately poorer life outcomes for those who rely on sidewalk connectivity and public transportation to navigate our city. Today, the pedestrian realm in Austin is regulated by outdated standards and procedures that contradict the public's current vision for our community to be a *beacon of sustainability, social equity, and economic opportunity*[1].

One of the most divisive issues facing our community, today, is the dichotomy between what Austin's urban environment will look like in 20 years following today's pedestrian realm design policies versus the vision Imagine Austin had set out for a compact and connected community. This disparity stands to widen with Austin's current $7.1B+ investment in transit networks[2] and the $350M+ investment in affordable housing development[3] if current design policies go unchanged.

A Journey Through Austin's Pedestrian Realm

The year is 2039, Project Connect's Blue Line is completed and thousands of new affordable homes of all types have been strategically developed concentrated along major transit corridors and activity centers.

Join Taylor, a resident of the Rundberg area as they navigate their community's sidewalk and transit network to visit family and friends in the Montopolis neighborhood. Taylor's journey is composed of two alternate futures: Future "A" where the public realm design standards of today are continued and Future "B" where policies that promote walkability and equity in our Project Connect Station walksheds and across the City are adopted.

Design for Equity

- **Extend our reach beyond projects:** The pedestrian realm is our most frequent interaction with projects.
- **Social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion:** The disparate states of the pedestrian realms is a symptom of systemic underinvestment.
- **Community engagement and gathering:** The identity and engagement of 'place' is strongly associated with the pedestrian realm experience.
- **Community resilience:** The pedestrian realm is the safety net of the built environment, providing for informal interactions, building social cohesion, and resilience.
- **Mobility and access:** One's mode of transportation shouldn't be a determinant of their health and life outcomes.

1 [NEIGHBOR]HOOD

CURRENT POLICY

City of Austin regulations do not require residential use development to provide street trees and sometimes allows these projects to pay a fee-in-lieu of providing a sidewalk.

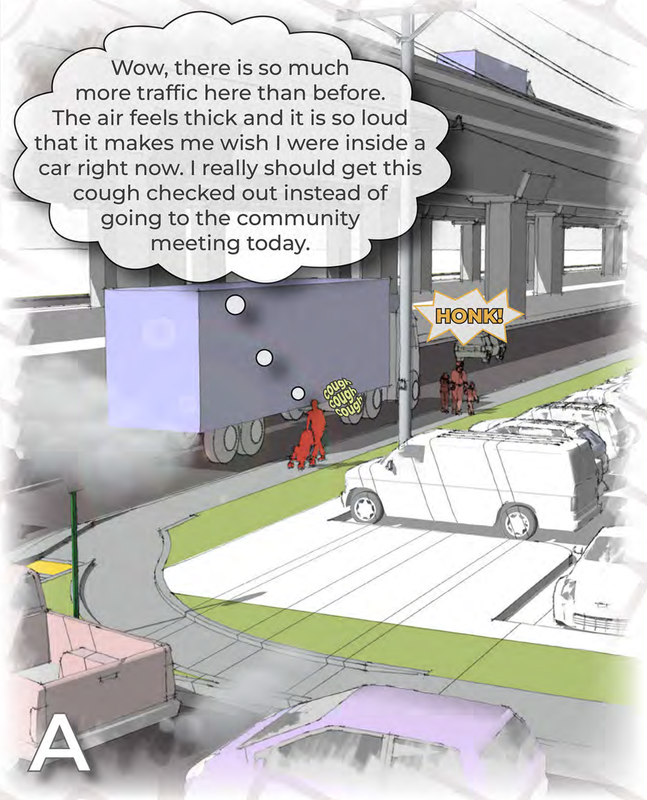
POLICY REDESIGN

Always require residential use development to provide street trees and a sidewalk within city limits.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Research suggests that a person is approximately **1.28 times more likely to know their neighbor with a 1-unit increase in their neighborhood's walkability score**[4]. Another study concluded that walkability enhances social capital by providing the means and locations for individuals to connect, share information, and interact, promoting human connection and increased economic opportunity[5].

2 TAKE A BREATH



CURRENT POLICY

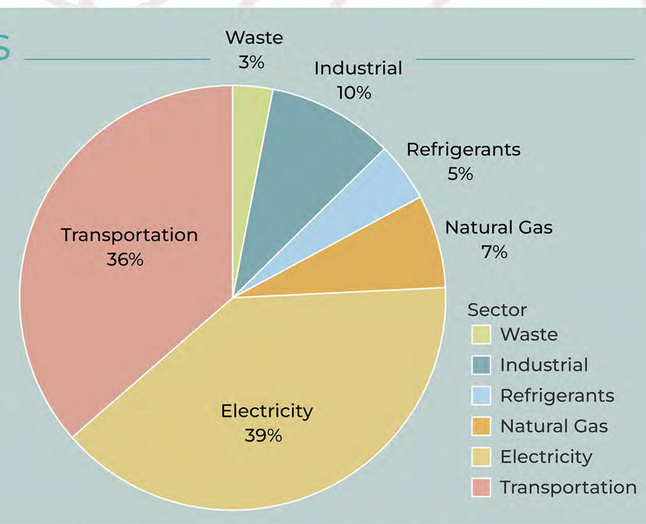
Public sidewalk projects are not required to provide the same clear zone and planting zone widths as private development projects. These projects are only regulated by PROWAG which allows for a 4-5' sidewalk immediately next to the curb[6].

POLICY REDESIGN

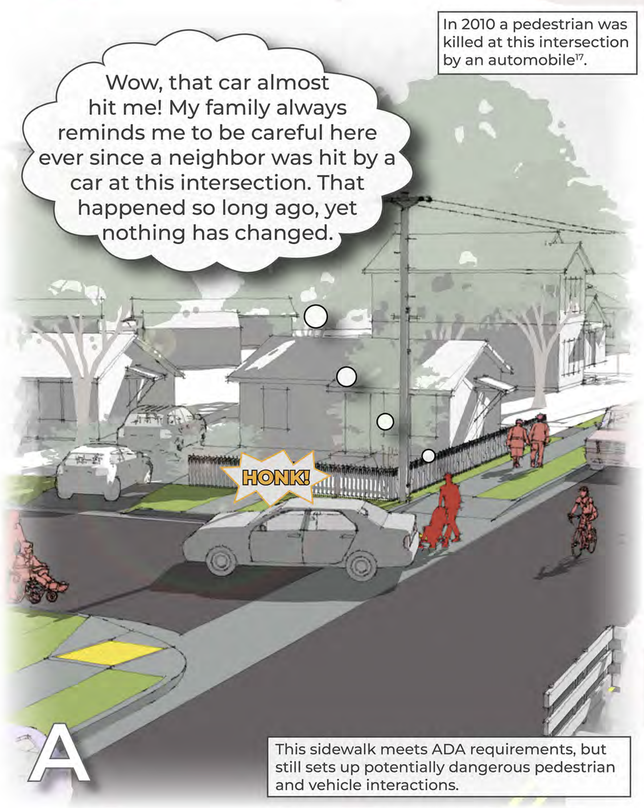
NACTO suggests an 8-12' clear zone in a commercial area and requires an additional 2' of clear zone width where it is located next to a curb[7].

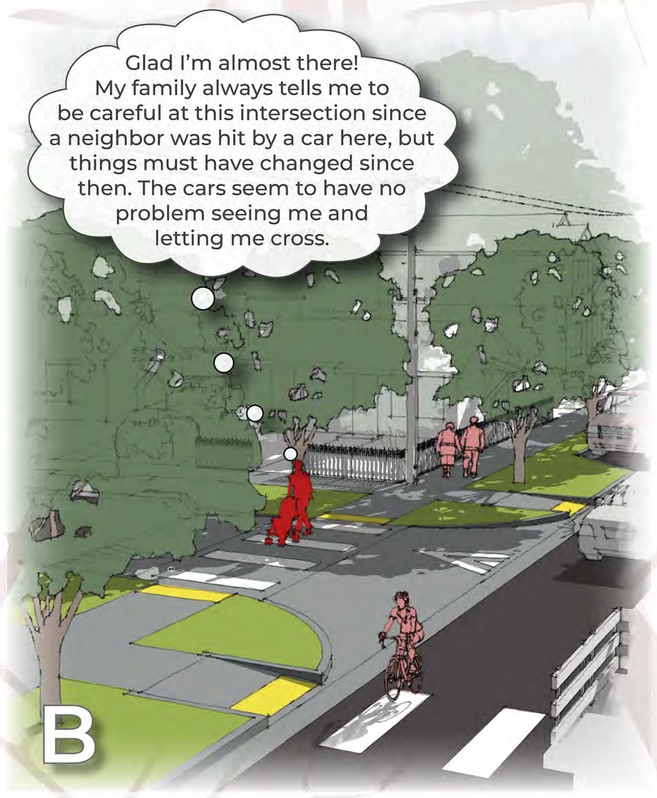
CARBON EMISSIONS

The two leading contributors to Austin's carbon emissions are transportation and electricity[8]. More electric vehicle use will trade transportation emissions for electricity emissions. Investing in infrastructure for walking, biking, and transit is essential to meet Austin's sustainability goals.



4 WATCH OUT

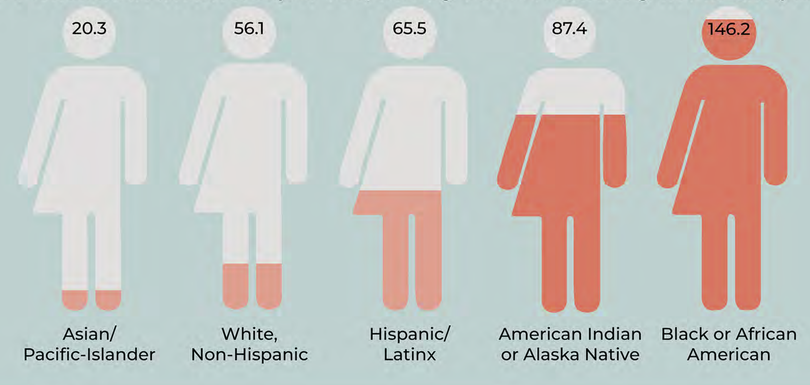




HEALTH + SAFETY

In Austin, and across the country, low-income communities are disproportionately affected by pedestrian crashes and tend to have more high-speed roads, poor visibility, and heavy traffic volume[12,13].

Average Pedestrian incidents per 100,000 by race & ethnicity in Austin (2018-2021)



CURRENT POLICY

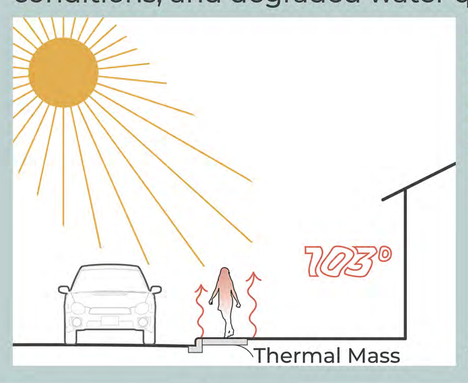
Intersection designs prioritize fast automobile turning movements over pedestrian safety.

POLICY REDESIGN

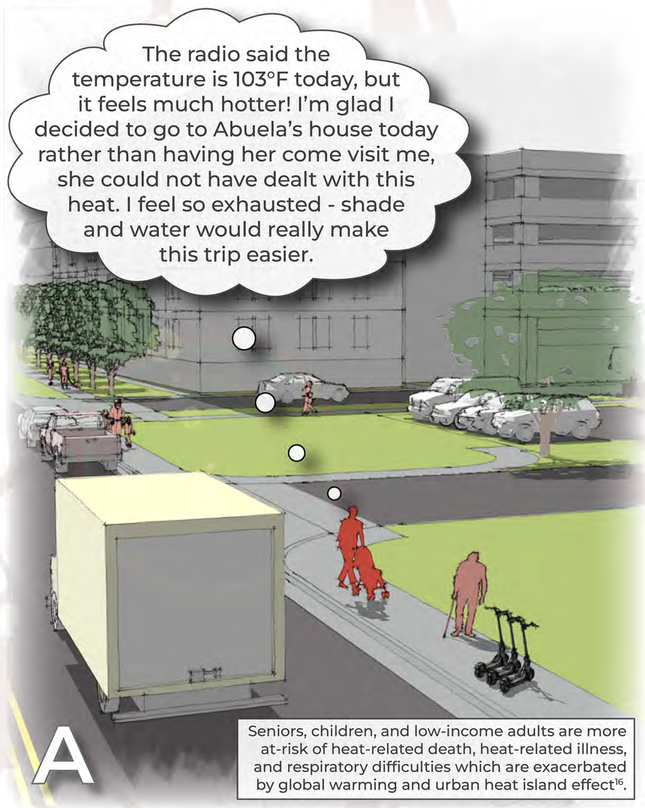
Provide curb extensions and raised crosswalks where higher traffic roadways intersect with neighborhood streets[7].

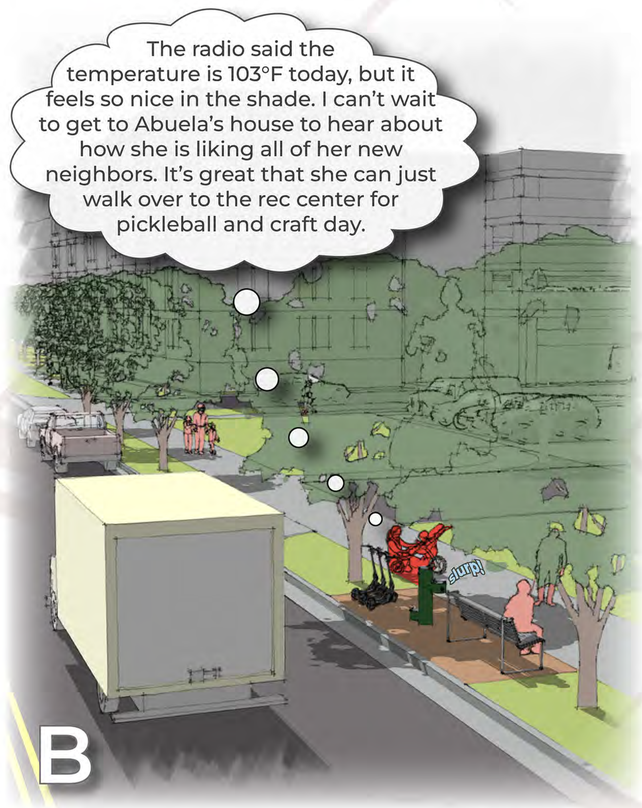
URBAN HEAT ISLAND

Downtown Austin is 6° hotter than its surroundings due to the Urban Heat Island Effect[10]. This leads to higher energy consumption, more greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants, dangerous human health conditions, and degraded water quality[11].



3 SUMMER IN THE CITY





CURRENT POLICY

Public sidewalk projects are not required to provide street trees. The 2016 Mobility bond does not include funding for street trees, water fountains, or street furniture[9].

POLICY REDESIGN

Allocate funding for street trees, water fountains and furniture from sources such as the parks fee collected from new development.

POLICY REDESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

The pedestrian realm in Austin is generally developed in two ways; 1. Developers make improvements along individual redevelopment sites ("private projects"), and 2. The Public Works and Transportation Departments ("public projects") make improvements along streets according to the Sidewalk Master Plan and Pedestrian Safety Action Plan.

To achieve a pedestrian realm that supports our equity and mobility goals, we propose new standards and procedures to "redesign" sidewalk and street tree development policy. Two types of recommendations (standards and procedures) are proposed for each component of development in the pedestrian realm (sidewalks and street trees). Public and private projects should follow the same requirements. In the case of constrained rights-of-way, public projects should adopt standardized reductions that prioritize pedestrians.

STANDARD PEDESTRIAN REALM DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

SIDEWALKS

1. STANDARD: Clear zone and planting zone widths should be increased to be more in-line with national best practices.

Street Type	Sidewalk	
	Clear Zone	Planting Zone
Core Transit Corridor	10'	8'
Urban Roadway	8'	7'
Suburban Roadway	6'	9'
Local or Residential Collector (TCM Level 1)	6'	6'
Principal or Major Arterial (TCM Level 4)	8'	15'

2. STANDARD: Require obstructing utilities be moved during utility replacement to avoid pedestrian conflicts (ex: overhead utilities in the sidewalk's path must relocate to be underground or in the planting zone; wet utilities must relocate to under the road bed.)

3. PROCEDURE: Remove fee in-lieu option for sidewalk construction.

4. PROCEDURE: Provide a "General permit" for public sidewalk projects designed to prioritize a flat, straight, and shaded sidewalk. Projects must only include approved sidewalk obstructions (i.e., driveways, existing trees, utility poles, topography) and street crossings (i.e., raised crosswalk, curb extension), and comply with the Public Projects - Constrained Right-Of-Way Reductions outlined below.

STREET TREES

5. STANDARD: Where overhead utilities conflict, reduce required spacing to 15' maximum with a "utility compatible" tree species.

6. PROCEDURE: Remove barriers to providing street trees in the Right-Of-Way including approving a Standard Detail for street trees and eliminating licensing agreement requirements and technical review for street trees in the ROW.

7. PROCEDURE: Allocate Parks Fee Funding for Street Trees planting.

PUBLIC PROJECTS - CONSTRAINED RIGHT-OF-WAY REDUCTIONS

Public sidewalk projects are typically constrained to the existing right-of-way. In many cases meeting the recommended standards will be impractical. Below, we propose a sequential list of reductions that provide flexibility for sidewalk design in constrained environments.

BASELINE: Adhere to the standard design guidelines including clear zone width, planting zone, street trees and prioritize straight, flat sidewalk placement.

#1 REDUCTION: Reduce road bed width to accommodate the minimum design requirements: eliminate the parking lane, reduce travel lane width to the minimum allowable, and/or use bulbouts (extended curb) to route around obstructions (i.e., tree root, utility pole, etc.).

#2 REDUCTION: Reduce the minimum design standards: 1st- eliminate sidewalk setback from edge of right-of way, 2nd- reduce planting zone width up to 40%, 3rd reduce clear zone by up to 15%.

#3 REDUCTION: No planting zone: eliminate the planting zone and increase the clear zone width by 2'.

#4 REDUCTION: Seek easements from abutting property owners.

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