

February 23, 2023

AIA Austin Members,

As you are all aware, TxDOT is in progress on the design for the I-35 rebuild stretching from 290 at the north, down to 290 south of downtown. We have been tracking the progress and are writing to give you an update on the situation, the Chapter's position on the current design and a few tips on the best way for you to help the voices of Austinites be heard by TxDOT.

Update on the Situation:

TxDOT is close to the end of their Schematic Design phase and have integrated some of the comments put forth by the community. There are still many issues that have either not been addressed, or have not been addressed to the degree we had hoped. The preferred scheme is Alternative 3 Modified and that can be found at <https://ftp.txdot.gov/pub/txdot/get-involved/aus/i-35-capital-express/020923-deis-appendix-b.pdf>

There are five city council members that are co-sponsoring a resolution that outlines their concerns and desires for changes to the existing plan. It is on the agenda for this **Thursday, 2/23** and is #44.

<https://www.austintexas.gov/department/city-council/2023/20230223-reg.htm#044>

Chapter position:

As this project will shape the way our city moves and behaves for at least the next 50-75 years, we are extremely invested in outcomes that will be environmentally responsible, socially equitable and focused on sound urban planning principles for a vibrant and livable city. TxDOT has made some changes to the original design, but there are many areas that need more work before it can meet the three previously mentioned criteria.

We have members who have been following this for many years and have a deeper understanding of the design proposal than I. We have asked for their recommendations for which areas that need the most attention and would bring the greatest positive impact if implemented. That list is concluded below.

Make your Voice heard - TIME SENSITIVE:

TxDOT is required to release a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and receive public comment for 60 days. We are in that window until **March 7**. We strongly encourage you and anyone you know who is impacted by this project to file your comments. It is quick and easy and does not require technical understanding of the design documents. We are including the list

of design concerns here for your use in moving them forward to TxDOT. This is one of the only ways that individuals can be put on record for concerns regarding the design of this major project.

We will continue to track this project and would love to hear from you all if you are interested in joining us in doing so. As with most things we do at AIA Austin, progress is made by volunteers giving their time, perspective and design thinking. This is a big one and we could use all your feedback and support.

I am also including a link to the DEIS. It is LONG....but it does include an executive summary that is only 20 pages and is well organized. Please consider reading this in order to give your comments context.

DEIS and link for filing comments: <https://my35capex.com/draft-eis/>

Council's list of concerns: <https://services.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=402543>

Areas of concern/areas of request:

- TxDOT should incentivize traffic to use SH130, which was built as a bypass to I-35, but is currently not financially structured to encourage long distance drivers to go around central Austin.
- Redesign any improvements to minimize induced demand, vehicle miles traveled, and the resulting pollution. This would include a robust study of induced demand, increased VMT, and a realistic assessment of both current and future pollution and that does not simply assume electric vehicles will solve these issues.
- Redesign water management, including management of stormwater, runoff, and flooding, to ensure that water is filtered and treated before being returned to the Colorado River.
- Document the impact of adding any highway lanes to local streets and the resulting impacts to walking and biking.
- Design the “boulevard” to NACTO and COA standards so that it functions as a street, not high-speed frontage road.
- Design ramping that is appropriate for urban areas and reduces the barrier of the highway. In most cities this is done with portal ramps. Consider removing ramping that is preventing additional connectivity.
- Allow street trees in all locations at the surface: frontage roads (between moving traffic and shared use paths), bridges, caps, etc.
- In order for transit services, walking, and biking to successfully operate along and across the I-35 corridor, there must be additional connectivity and additional capping. The Austin Strategic Mobility Plan plans for a significant mode shift and this project should support those goals. (See council resolution for their recommendation of frequency)

- Mitigation strategies beyond capping in part of downtown and part of UT Austin should be offered. This should include strategies that align with Austin's Climate Equity plans to reduce transportation emissions.
- Provide additional protections for Austin's parkland and open spaces, including adding parkland and open space amenities that benefit the citizens of Austin. Ensure that any parks, which are directly impacted, including the Town Lake Metropolitan Park, Waller Beach, Edward Rendon Sr. Park at Festival Beach and Palm Park, and any urban trails directly impacted, including the Butler Hike-and-Bike Trail and the Red Line Parkway, have improved access and usability with this project.
- Design the project so that additional caps and stitches can be added at a later date throughout the length of the project.
- Design the project so that caps can be occupied by both park-like open spaces or buildings or 3-4 stories to allow for best use of the area over time.
- Mitigate displacement of communities of color and low-income families by minimizing the proposed ROW. The preferred scheme proposes to increase the ROW to an extent which places a possible 107 commercial and residential properties at risk of displacement, some of which would displace non-white and lower-income populations.
- Engage urban design, landscape and architecture professionals in addition to engineers when developing all components of the project.

Additional links for information:

<https://downtownaustin.com/what-we-do/current-projects/i35/>

https://ulidigitalmarketing.blob.core.windows.net/ulidcnc/sites/6/2020/09/ULI-ASP_Report_Austin_I-35_2020.pdf

Thank you as always for your commitment to this profession and the responsibilities that come with it.



Christy Taylor, AIA
AIA Austin President, 2023