TXDOT WILL REBUILD I-35.
HOW CAN AUSTIN BENEFIT ?

Our support for investing in I-35 is nuanced and contingent upon gaining a more productive multimodal transportation network that addresses the current stresses of growth and lays the groundwork for reclaiming our city. Planning for sidewalks, urban trails and bike facilities has been done by the city of Austin. Planning for I-35 as it slices through Austin has been done by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). We will not achieve significantly improved mobility and accessibility unless we address how these networks work together to impact our transportation system.

The City should consider what policies, design choices, and implementation best support its goal of a Compact and Connected city. There are clear and feasible design solutions for the I-35 corridor to achieve greater safety, mobility, and environmental and social health for central Austin--pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, and local traffic - while also addressing the needs of commuters and through traffic on the highway. We will be further negligent if we fail to use this opportunity to invest in our already-adopted active transportation infrastructure plans, which will themselves further the benefits of improving I-35.

It is up to the City of Austin to be the caretaker of the urban environment that directly interacts with the highway and to consider funding effective strategies that address mobility, accessibility, quality of life, and the principles of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. This is our generation's opportunity to align the future interstate with the values of Austinites.

This document serves to elaborate on what should be obtained through a November 2016 mobility bond and why these elements are so important for the City.

BURY IT. The bond should ensure that I-35 is depressed through downtown Austin in such a way to allow for future capping. The elevated option should be taken off the table entirely, and only the depressed option should be brought through the NEPA environmental review process.

RECONNECT IT. The bond should call for reconnecting all east-west streets divided by I-35 to re-stitch the vital urban grid above the depressed freeway. East-west streets meeting the I-35 corridor in the urban core beyond downtown should be connected where feasible.

RECLAIM IT. The bond should designate all frontage roads, intersections, and future bridges across depressed main lanes as safe city streets that enhance adjacent land value and foster multimodality instead of functioning perilously as both a redundant highway and city street network.

STUDY IT. The bond should fund a City-issued independent analysis of removing the upper decks and depressing I-35 through 51st Street to have a complete understanding of what the city might gain in economic, social, equitable, and environmental benefits.

FUND IT. The bond should fully fund all high-priority sidewalk projects identified through the 2009 Sidewalk Master Plan and the complete 2014 Bicycle Master Plan to alleviate congestion, improve affordability and equity, support the health and safety of our community, and return significant value to the City.

BURY IT.

No part of the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) Mobility35 plan enjoys as much broad support from downtown stakeholders than the plan to fully depress I-35 between Holly and 15th Streets. Despite indications to TxDOT and the City of Austin through numerous public input processes that the depressed option is incontrovertibly the preferred design, TxDOT has not formally selected it as the only option to carry into the environmental study.

Support the "depressed" option. The depressed option should be the only alternative put through the NEPA environmental review process, and the City should support extending the main lane depression through 51st Street. Depressing the lanes removes the physical barrier of the existing structure and creates the possibility for further improvements to the urban realm. High-speed through traffic would be grade-separated from the slower movement of pedestrians, cyclists, transit riders and cars using city streets, increasing safety and comfort of these users while simultaneously allowing I-35 to better function as a means of moving vehicles through the corridor. The depresed main lane design, however, should not preclude the addition of a future rail line.

Anticipate a future full cap of I-35. The retaining walls throughout the depressed main lanes should be designed and built to support the addition of a future cap. A continuous cap over I-35 will enable significant value capture on downtown land value where the existing infrastructure depresses property value, as well as additional space created by the caps.

Eliminate the "Modified Existing" option. Despite strong opposition to the "Modified Existing" (elevated) option from local neighborhood associations, community groups and the I-35 Downtown Stakeholder Working Group, TxDOT continues to spend taxpayer money to study this alternative. The Modified Existing option will commit huge levels of State and potentially City funds to expanding the deleterious elevated interstate whose continued presence is directly antithetical to multiple priorities of the Imagine Austin Plan and the wishes of city stakeholders. Local funding toward I-35 should be contingent upon an express agreement from TxDOT to remove the Modified Existing option from further consideration and a complete cessation of spending toward bringing that option through the NEPA environmental process.

RECONNECT IT.

A connected street grid across I-35 is essential for the future health of the city. A grid serves to disperse traffic, create proximity, and ease movement for all modes. This in turn helps make trips shorter, makes alternative modes of travel more attractive, and potentially reduces reliance on single-occupancy vehicles, equating to some reduction in congestion. The connected street grid of downtown Austin fosters resiliency in mobility that the I-35 corridor lacks. And rebuilding lost street connections across I-35 and creating new connections between central neighborhoods will further strengthen the City's road network

Improve safety. I-35 and its frontage roads are dangerous for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians alike. 2015 was the deadliest year on record for traffic crashes in Austin. 17 (16.6%) of the 102 deaths that occurred on our roadways happened in crashes on I-35, its frontage roads, and intersections with city streets[1]. Too often, the cause of traffic crashes is cited as the fault of impaired and distracted drivers or people failing to use appropriate pedestrian or bicycle facilities. These are easy conclusions to reach but a vital component of both the problem and the solution to many of our traffic-related injuries and deaths is the design of the roads themselves - including the width of streets and vehicle lanes, the presence of traffic calming elements, design speeds, and connected networks of sidewalks and bike lanes. Initiatives toward improving road design have measurable positive impacts on safety and comfort for all modes of travel.

Re-establish lost connections across I-35. Connections should be restored, at a minimum, at the following intersections: Cesar

Chavez, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 11th, 12th, 14th, and 15th Streets. To accommodate the complexity of the urban environment, these east-west connections across I-35 must be human-scaled, not auto-scaled. Bridges and intersections that are constructed to re-stitch the grid must be safe and comfortable for all users – wide sidewalks, street trees, bicycle lanes, transit facilities, narrow vehicle lanes, and traffic calming at intersections – and meet the requirements of the Great Streets Master Plan and Subchapter E of the Land Development Code.

Expand east-west connectivity beyond downtown. New connections should be studied, at a minimum, at the following intersections: 30th, 32nd, Concordia, 41st/ Wilshire, 46th/Bentwood, Philomena and 49th/Barbara Jordan. A complete depression of I-35 through 51st Street would make these connections viable and improve local traffic flow in North Central Austin.

RECLAIM IT.

The I-35 corridor through downtown will soon be a neighbor to a world-class linear park along Waller Creek, a brand-new Medical District, a growing University, and the subsequent development that those vibrant destinations will help spur. It is critical that the City consider how best to invest in creating a downtown I-35 corridor that supports the success of its adjoining urban environment. Creating frontage roads and bridges that allow for safe and comfortable navigation for those in cars, on foot, on bike, and on transit only serves to benefit the health and productivity of Austin. This is an environment where the city of Austin could (and should) have the greatest impact on the choices made to their design. Local investment in the I-35 corridor through a 2016 bond referendum should include consideration for the design of the frontage roads and bridges to allow them to function more as city streets instead of high-speed arterials.

Include facilities for all modes on frontage roads and bridges. Currently the frontage roads function as a redundant highway system, despite their close interaction with multimodal city streets. Without adequate space for varied users along the frontage roads and connections across I-35, mode-bias becomes unsafe for everyone. This can be alleviated by providing comfortable and separated space for all mode users, which includes well-connected sidewalk and bicycle networks, transit improvements (including dedicated lanes, queue jumpers, crosswalks and accessible, protected bus shelters), and lower-speed vehicular traffic.

Lower the design speed of the frontage roads. This is a key component of simultaneously improving the safety and fluidity of the frontage roads. Lowered speed limits and increased enforcement help improve safety, but focusing on the physical design of the streets goes much further in effectively reducing vehicular speeds. Lowering design speeds requires, among other efforts, narrowing vehicle lanes and incorporating traffic calming measures like street trees and street parking. Additionally, removing on- and off-ramps, where feasible, will significantly reduce speed differential and merging conflicts between fast-moving highway traffic and local vehicle traffic, pedestrian and bicyclists.

Improve intersections at every cross street. The benefit of improving street design along the frontage roads and bridges is lost if the same consideration is not paid to intersections - space through which all users pass. Intersections must be human-scaled to foster multimodality. This can be achieved by creating crosswalks that reduce the distance a pedestrian will have to navigate across the frontage roads, ample space in sidewalk or bulb outs, reduction in the number of curb cuts, signalized crossings, pedestrian-level lighting, and decreasing distances between intersections to ensure pedestrians do not have to attempt dangerous mid-street crossings.

STUDY IT.

Nationally and internationally, cities have successfully removed aging elevated urban freeways and found tremendous benefits to economic development, mobility

and quality of life. The upper decks - in contrast - are visual, physical, economic, and psychological obstacles that discourage pedestrian and bicycle mobility, disconnect neighborhoods, depress property values, inhibit economic development and disproportionately subject nearby residential and commercial areas to elevated noise, air and water pollution.

Reject additional capacity on the upper decks. TxDOT's current plans do not call for depressing I-35 north of 15th Street and no such considerations have been studied as part of the Mobility35 planning efforts. Through North Central Austin, the plans instead will add an additional lane and structural reinforcing to the upper decks[2]. These plans have not been properly vetted by city stakeholders. Adding this capacity to and extending the life of the upper decks should not be sanctioned without due consideration of all reasonable alternatives.

Fund a long-range vision study for the upper decks. The City should initiate and fund an independent study for a long-range vision for I-35 without upper decks. At a minimum, this study should include a feasibility analysis--including social, environmental and economic benefits--of the removal of the upper decks and depressing I-35 through 51st Street and be guided by principles of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. Despite numerous studies and countless public funds invested in programs for I-35 through Central Austin, neither the City nor TxDOT have ever undertaken a study of the removal of the upper decks or signaled any intent to do so. We must have a long-range vision plan for this aging infrastructure that places priority on the health of the city and North Central neighborhoods.

Such study should be conducted by a qualified firm which has not previously contracted with and does not currently do business with TxDOT, affiliated consultants, or research centers and would be selected and funded exclusively by City of Austin via a publically-issued Request for Qualifications solicitation. Minimum qualifications should include demonstrated expertise in traffic engineering, civil engineering, urban planning and design, economic analysis and demonstrated experience with highway removal projects.

FUND IT.

In order to fully realize the potential of our city to support active, human-powered modes of transportation, significant investments must be made in our active transportation infrastructure, including protected bike lanes, sidewalks and Urban Trails. This infrastructure will address Austin's mobility, equity and affordability challenges but only if it receives the necessary funding and political capital needed for its effective implementation.

Fully fund the Bicycle Master Plan. Austin's currently unfunded 2014 Bicycle Master Plan envisions an all ages and abilities, family-friendly system of protected bike lanes and urban trails throughout Austin that prioritizes connections to high-capacity transit, economic centers and local schools. Building out the Bicycle Master Plan will increase cycling mobility into Austin's Central Business District by 20,000 daily trips, representing a 7% reduction in motor vehicle traffic into the densest part of Austin. Funding Urban Trails, in particular, will boost connectivity by creating transportation routes along creeks, which connect disparate and sometimes disconnected street grid networks. A representative study by the City of Austin in 2013 found that over 50% of Austinites (roughly 400,000 people) would ride their bikes to work and on errands regularly if they could do so in a protected bike path. Extending protected bike lanes to more neighborhoods throughout Austin will get even more people out of single-occupancy cars, freeing up space on our busiest roadways for people who have no choice but to drive.

Allocate funding to the Sidewalk Master Plan. Austin currently has a $1 billion city-wide sidewalk infrastructure deficit. While sidewalk deficiencies occur in all 10 Council districts, many low-income neighborhoods lack sidewalks entirely. For those populations, already burdened by high transportation costs, this inequitable distribution makes access to more affordable options unsafe and inconvenient. Austin's Sidewalk Master Plan confronts historical inequities and prioritizes sidewalk construction in part by focusing on

neighborhoods with the greatest need for sidewalks. The Plan, however, does not have a dedicated and reliable source of funding.

The city should fully fund all of the high-priority projects identified in the 2009 Sidewalk Master Plan. Equitable access to well-integrated and safe sidewalks connects communities to critical assets including schools, parks, transit stops, grocery stores, economic centers and healthcare facilities. If provided safe access to appropriate infrastructure, Austinites do choose to walk in great numbers - in many of the census tracts throughout Austin's urban core, where most of the sidewalk network has been built out, over 20 percent of Austinites walk or bike to work regularly.

Support Vision Zero policy goals. Infrastructure safety improvements like bike lanes and sidewalks are a tenet of reducing traffic fatalities – the central goal of Austin's Vision Zero program, recently codified in our Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. Where the City has "right-sized" streets by adding bike lanes, reducing travel lanes and improving pedestrian safety infrastructure, crashes have been reduced by up to 38 percent for everyone (regardless of mode) and deadly speeding has been nearly eliminated in most cases. Right now, communities of color bear a disproportionate share of traffic deaths and serious injuries in Austin, due in part to the inequitable distribution of sidewalks and bike lanes discussed above. Building out sidewalks and bike lanes to popular neighborhood destinations like schools and parks will reduce this disproportionate toll in addition to improving safety city-wide.

REFERENCES

[1] Chavez, Nicole, Philip Jankowski, and Katie Urbaszewki. "Record Number of Traffic Deaths Has Officials Scratching Their Heads." *Austin American-Statesman.* January 8, 2016. http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/traffic/record-number-of-traffic-deaths-has-officials-scra/npzTT/.

[2] Denny, Amy. "TxDOT's 10-year I-35 plan includes new lanes on upper decks, depressing downtown lanes." *Community Impact.* June 15, 2015. http://communityimpact.com/austin/city-county/2015/06/15/txdots-10-year-i-35-plan-includes-new-lanes-on-upper-decks-depressing-downtown-lanes/.