

LONG TERM SECTION: BURNET ROAD - RUTLAND DRIVE TO MOPAC



Photo by City of Austin depicts former version of the Burnet Road plan.

Thursday, May 21, 2020 by [Ryan Thornton](#)
ROADS

Ultimate vision for Burnet loses center-running dedicated transitways, gains two traffic lanes

The Austin Transportation Department's [2013 Corridor Development Program](#) for Burnet Road envisions a future of cycle tracks, bus stop pullouts, shade trees, and for the roadway section between U.S. Highway 183 and MoPac Expressway, "two exclusive (bus rapid transit) lanes in the middle of the corridor."

Instead, the department is currently seeking environmental clearance on an [unfunded plan](#) to expand the 2.5-mile segment from a five-lane undivided roadway into a six-lane divided roadway, with two new general traffic lanes, a modified center turn lane and no center-running dedicated transitways.

"Regarding center-running bus lanes, that was consistent with Capital Metro's specific plans in 2013, but Project Connect has since taken a more system-wide approach," Jessica Engelhardt, spokesperson with the Corridor Program Office, said over email Wednesday. "Following passage of the 2016 Mobility Bond, all of the corridor mobility plans were updated to reflect the latest plans and corridor conditions."

The expansion would require buying up 6.14 acres of right of way, but the 2016 mobility bond's \$482 million corridor program allocation does not contain the funds for the 25-foot right-of-way acquisition. The new travel lanes, among other modifications, will only be built if there is a new source of funding, such as another mobility bond. But the 2016 bond does allow for some critical improvements, like 9-foot accessible shared-use paths and landscaping buffers on either side of the road, that could be under construction by late 2022.

Engelhardt said the goal is to go through an environmental review for the complete design up front (necessary since the road segment is owned by the Texas Department of Transportation), go through with the shared-use paths and other improvements using 2016 bond money, and be ready to repurpose that infrastructure if funding for the expansion is made available.

Due to a combination of high traffic volume, frequency of driveways, an absence of bicycle lanes, and a lack of sidewalk connectivity, this stretch of Burnet Road has carved out its place in the city's High Injury Network, a relatively small set of road segments on which almost 70 percent of all serious injury and fatal crashes take place. In a presentation on the corridor Wednesday, Lars Anderson, project manager with the city, said there have been 918 traffic crashes on these 2.5 miles in the last five years, resulting in 19 serious injuries and four deaths.

Among those 918 crashes, 19 involved either people walking or bicycling, signaling the need for safe active transportation infrastructure. But Tom Wald, bicycle advocate and executive director of the Red Line Parkway Initiative, told the *Austin Monitor* that the design puts the cycle path dangerously close to car traffic, separated only by a 2-foot buffer, contrary to previous formal policy recommendations by the city's Bicycle Advisory Council.

"(It) puts the street trees and landscaping between the bikeway and sidewalk," Wald said. "Instead, the trees should be put between the bikeway and the motor vehicle lanes, and a smaller buffer should be put between the bikeway and sidewalk."

The initial improvements using existing bond funding would accomplish this goal by placing 11-foot landscaping barriers between traffic lanes and the 9-foot shared-use paths. But, with additional funding, the department plans to use the landscaping to separate people on bicycles from those on foot, shifting the bicycle path over next to the roadway.

While the 2013 Burnet development program allows for buffers of two or three feet to separate bicycles and cars, the envisioned section of Burnet Road from Rutland Drive north to MoPac contained a buffer as well as a lane of on-street parking situated between the bicycle lanes and flowing car traffic.

Wald said he is concerned about the addition of two car traffic lanes with vehicles likely traveling between 35 and 55 mph, especially since they are not being reserved for transit vehicles.

In addition to the recommendation for bus rapid transit in the 2013 plan, Burnet Road north of U.S. 183 to Braker Lane is an Imagine Austin Corridor and part of the city's [Transit Priority Network](#) under the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan. The entire road segment is also located in the North Burnet/Gateway Station Imagine Austin center.

More than that, the entire stretch of Burnet Road from around 45th Street to the north side of the Domain has been included in the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority's [Project Connect](#) vision as part of one of its MetroRapid routes, corridors for high-capacity buses running in transit-only lanes free from traffic.

Anderson said the city is collaborating on the Burnet corridor with Capital Metro, particularly on the design for planned bus stop enhancements. But when asked about the corridor design and the absence of any center-running transitways, Jenna Maxfield with Capital Metro pointed the *Austin Monitor* back to the city to “more fully answer these questions.”

“Capital Metro is continuing our coordination with the Corridor Program Office as they have their public hearing on the Burnet Road corridor,” Maxfield said. “It is important for them to hear from the public on this project, and we will continue to work with the city as they craft solutions for this corridor, which is one of our MetroRapid lines in Project Connect.”

Likewise, Engelhardt said the city is “accounting for station locations and other improvements that will be supportive of the MetroRapid lines included in current operations and those contemplated in the Project Connect Long Term Vision Plan.”

As a function of bus rapid transit, the 2013 Burnet plan also recommends long-term investments in bus pullouts for transit stops, a design feature that allows buses to move out of general traffic lanes to pick up and drop off passengers. In the current [design schematic](#), however, these too are missing, in favor of platforms located adjacent to traffic lanes.

“Bus pullout recommendations have changed since the corridor mobility plan was finalized in 2013,” Engelhardt said. “Capital Metro has provided guidance that they do not recommend bus pullouts without accompanying traffic control or signaling. ... Some bus pullouts can accommodate traffic control and/or signaling to allow buses to reenter the flow of traffic, but otherwise, these pullouts can reduce transit service quality.”

The department expects to get environmental clearance for the full design, including the added right of way, in June or July. Design work for the immediate safety and mobility infrastructure funded by the 2016 bond is likely to be complete in fall 2021.

A virtual [public hearing](#) on the corridor opened Wednesday and will close at 5 p.m. on Friday, June 5.

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