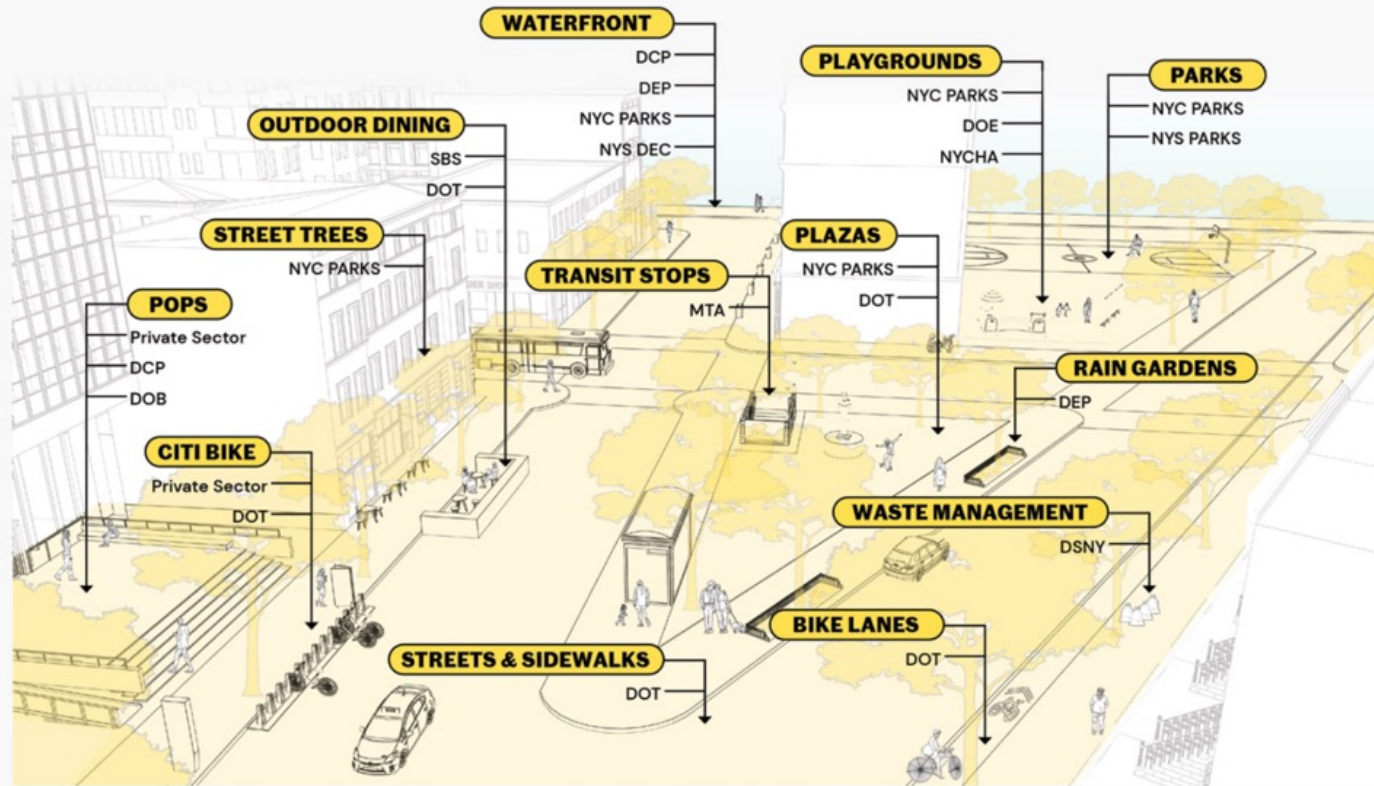


GREEN STREETS INITIATIVE to Keep Austin Cool



The jumble of key agencies and entities that oversee elements of the public realm. Rendering: MAS

February 26, 2024 City of Austin Design Commission Presentation

Prepared by Kevin Howard, Urbinden, Jana McCann, FAIA, McCann Adams Studio and Kate McCarroll, LBJ School 2024 MPAF Candidate

WHY AUSTIN NEEDS GREEN STREETS

- We can address growth and climate change using public rights-of-way. As heat increases, shade and evaporative cooling from trees will be necessary for life, health and safety.
- Street trees make walking, biking and taking transit possible in our increasingly longer and hotter summers.
- Increasing vegetation - particularly trees - is an effective way to make Austin more livable and resilient to the effects of climate change.
- **Street trees are essential urban infrastructure**, not just “nice-to-haves” or beautification”.



Example of continuous shade trees at curbside, providing both shade and protection from road for sidewalk users

STREET TREE BENEFITS

LIFE SAFETY



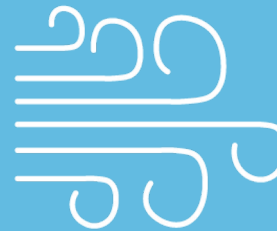
HEALTH



MENTAL HEALTH



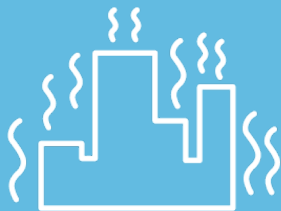
AIR QUALITY



WATER QUALITY



URBAN HEAT



CLIMATE CHANGE



ECOSYSTEMS



PUBLIC FINANCE



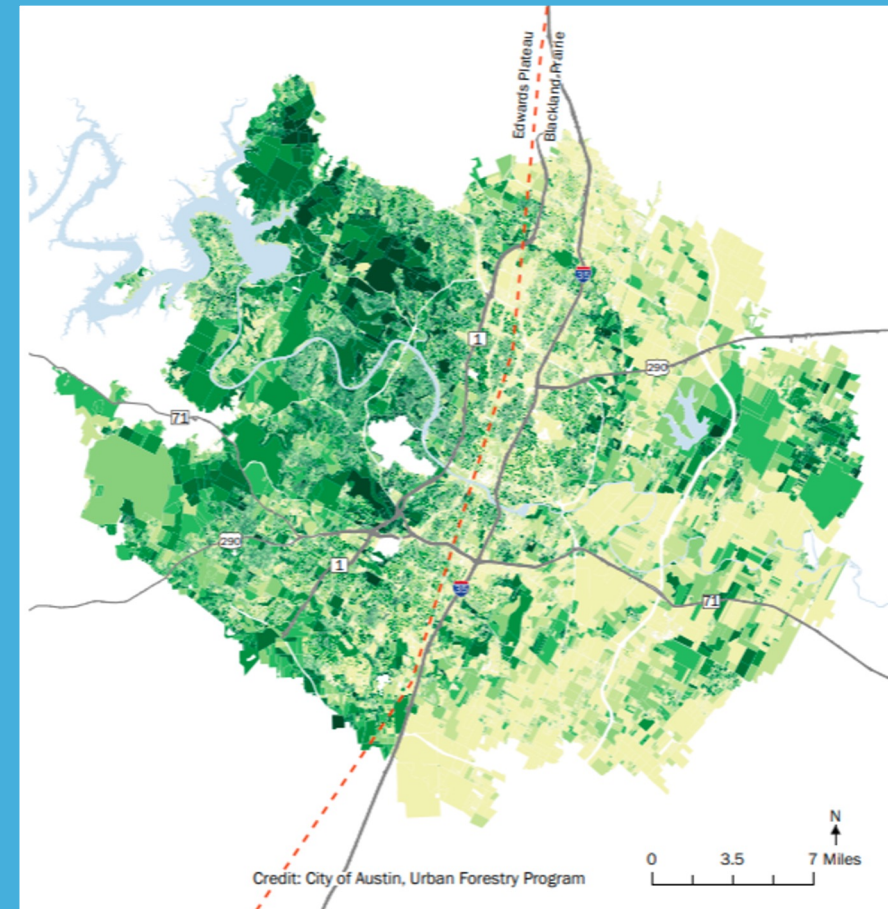
CULTURE & IDENTITY



Street trees along major transit corridors are essential if we expect to achieve our 50% mode split goal by 2039.

WHERE ARE THE TREES?

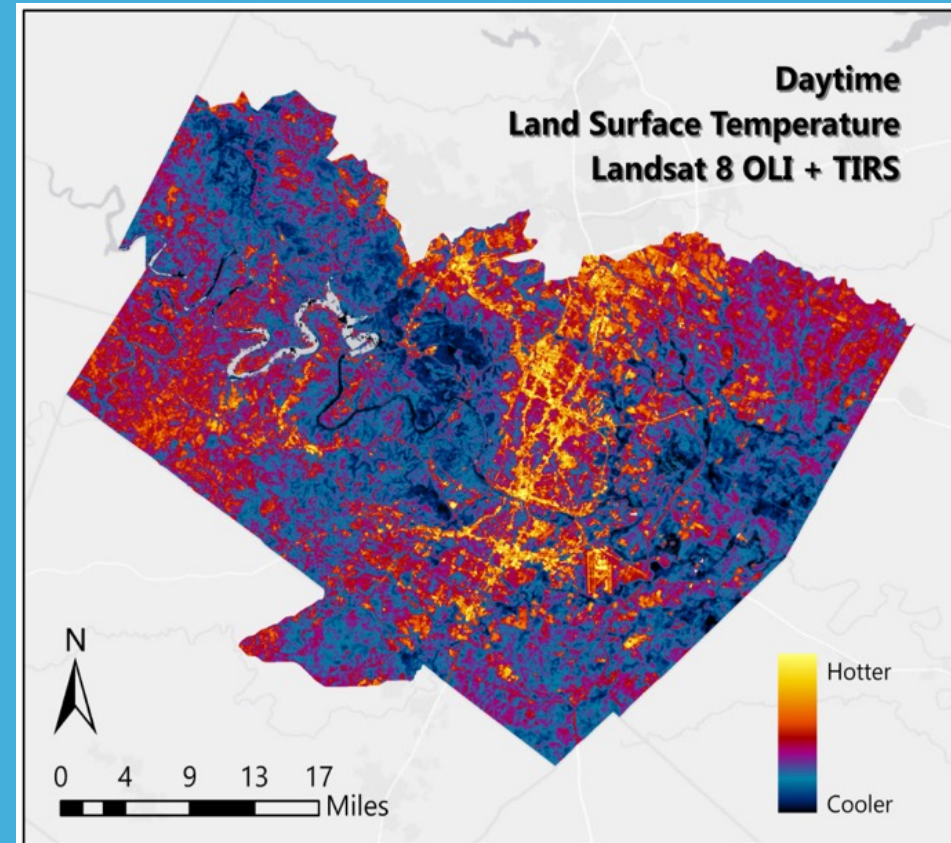
- Austin over-relies on private yards and natural areas for its urban forest, which are in wealthier parts of town.
- **Less than 3% of Austin's ROWs are required to have street trees**, so our public pathways are rarely shaded.
- Yet, **street trees are one of the most desired community benefits**, according to many public surveys and in the "Contracts with Voters" in recent bond elections.



The City's Tree Canopy Map shows lack of "shade equity" on the east side.

WHERE ARE OUR URBAN HEAT ISLANDS?

- The worst urban heat island effects follow our paved street network.
- YET, streets are where we walk, bike, roll, catch transit - exactly where it must be cooler.
- AND, lower-income residents – who depend more on transit - live on the hotter, east side.
- The worsening heat islands are a major public health risk for everyone, but especially for our most vulnerable communities.



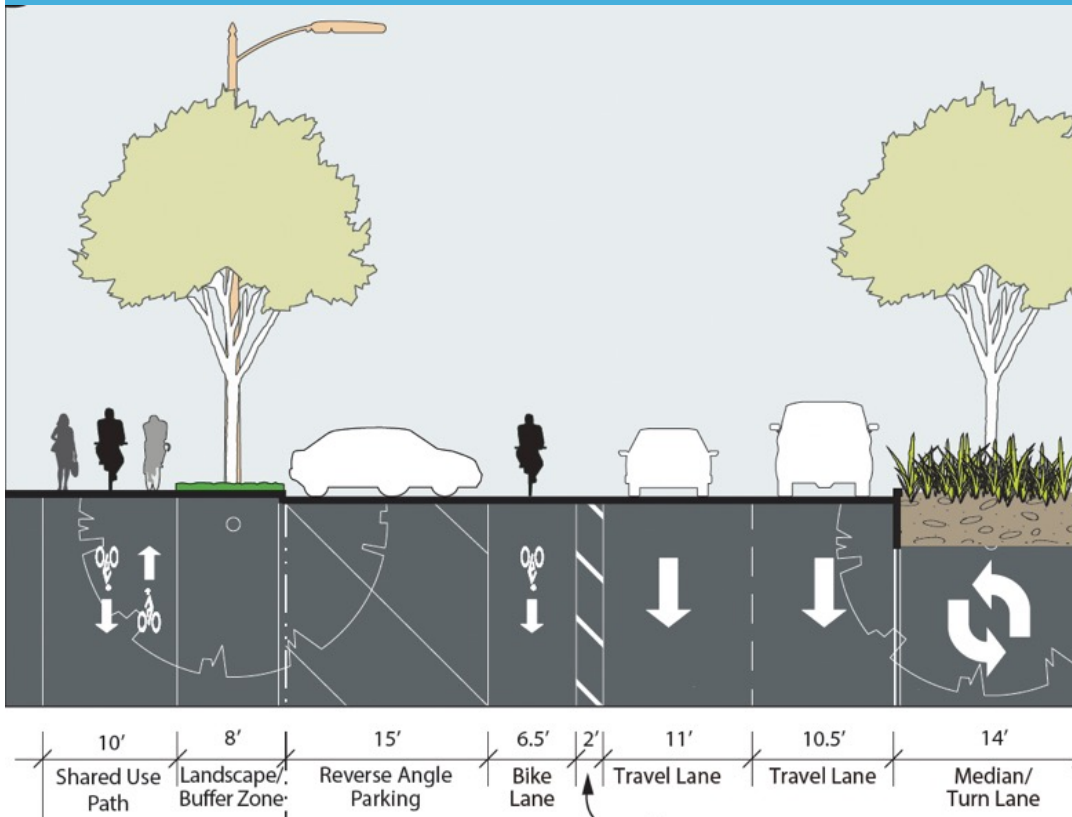
Heat Map of Austin showing the **yellow**, hottest areas focused in East Austin and Downtown

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

1. The **LACK OF LEADERSHIP** means that review staff are conducting reviews and making decisions, with little guidance and support.
2. Austin's **REGULATIONS** are not aligned with City and community priorities: if they were, street trees would be required of development.
3. The City's **DEPARTMENTAL SILOS** preclude integrated and responsive urban design.
4. The **PERMITTING PROCESS** – eliminating license agreement process and reduce required discretion and inconsistent implementation.
5. It is more **EXPENSIVE** to plant street trees in public ROWs: we need to assure they can be subsidized for transit and affordable housing projects.

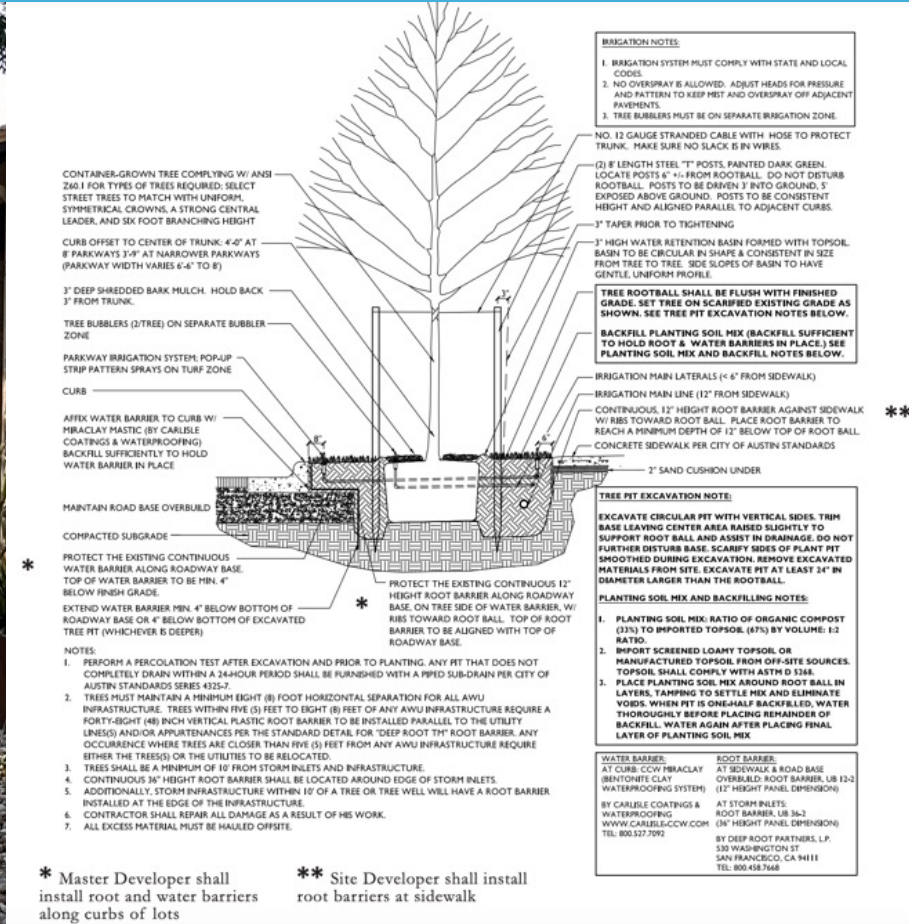
Street trees compete with utilities for space in the ROW and generally come out the losers – along with the community.

WHAT'S THE BUILT OUTCOME?



Above is what was designed (left) for the City's Corridor Construction Program for Airport Blvd near Koenig Ln, ...and what actually got built (right). If we build like this, will they use transit?

TODAY, A POSITIVE OUTCOME REQUIRES A SPECIAL CASE.



The Mueller community and other PUDs are the exception in requiring street trees along all roadways - within the public ROW.

1. Lack of Leadership

- There is no single person or group responsible for ensuring that City policies are reflected in its rules and regulations, and no one with the authority to marshal various ROW stakeholder interests in a way that achieves the best urban design and highest levels of community benefit.
- Street trees are not treated as the *critical public infrastructure they are*, and there is no shared vision for the kind of streetscapes that staff should be helping deliver to the community.
- Today, permitting and implementation is often led. by junior staff, without support or oversight by such a “**public realm coordinator**”. Staff should be afforded better training and clear tools to do their job.



Ya-Ting Liu is New York City's newly appointed chief public realm officer.

“Our city’s public spaces are too important to fall through the cracks of bureaucracy, and now they won’t,” Mayor Adams said.

Ms. Liu said that she saw her new job as being the “central point person” for city agencies and the public, in hopes of making it easier to create and maintain public spaces. “I think we want to provide more support, to make that process more seamless, less friction,” she said.

In 2023, NYC created a **Public Realm Officer** post in the Mayor’s office to coordinate and facilitate high-quality, public space projects.

LBJ Student Research

These are results from a semester-long Policy Research Project at LBJ School of Public Affairs, UT Austin (Fall 2023).

6 peer cities were interviewed:

- **Dallas, TX**- Parks & Rec. Dept., Public Works Dept.
- **Denver, CO**- Parks & Rec. Dept., Dept. of Transportation & Infrastructure
- **Plano, TX**- Parks & Rec. Dept.
- **Portland, OR**- Parks & Rec. Bureau, Bureau of Transportation
- **San Antonio, TX**- Parks & Rec. Dept.
- **Tucson, AZ**- City Manager's Office

	<u>Street Tree Efforts</u>	<u>Geographic Climate</u>	<u>Political Climate</u>	<u>Municipally Owned Utilities</u>	<u>Population (2020)</u>
Austin, TX	Yes	South	Mayor Kirk Watson (D), Governor Greg Abbott (R)	Yes	961,855
Dallas, TX	Yes	South	Mayor Eric Johnson (R)*, Governor Greg Abbott (R)	No	1,304,379
Denver, CO	Yes	Southwest	Mayor Mike Johnston (D), Governor Jared Polis (D)	No	715,522
Plano, TX	Yes	South	Mayor John B. Muns (R), Governor Greg Abbott (R)	No	285,494
Portland, OR	Yes	Northwest	Mayor Ted Wheeler (D), Governor Tina Kotek (D)	Yes	652,503
San Antonio, TX	Yes	South	Mayor Ron Nirenberg (I), Governor Greg Abbott (R)	Yes	1,434,625
Tucson, AZ	Yes	Southeast	Mayor Regina Romero (D), Governor Katie Hobbs (D)	No	542,629
			<i>*Mayor Eric Johnson announced he is changing his party affiliation to Republican in September of 2023</i>		

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Survey/Interview question focused on:

- **Funding**
 - For planting
 - For maintenance
 - **Interdepartmental Cooperation**
 - Departments involved
 - Where street tree efforts are housed within city government
 - Final authority when conflicts arise
 - **Rules and Regulations**
 - Codes, criteria manuals, planting standards, etc.
 - Navigating restrictions
- **Key Barriers**
- **Peer City Network**

LBJ Student Research

Funding Types:

- *For Planting*
 - CIPs / Transportation Maintenance Funds
 - “Tree Mitigation Funds”
 - NGOs
 - City Budgets
- *For Maintenance*
 - Adjacent lot owner
 - Often choose to let tree die rather than maintain it

→ *Key barrier*

LBJ Student Research

Interdepartmental Relationships

- ***City Departments Involved***

- Parks, Urban Forestry, Public Works, Utilities, Transportation

- ***Authority***

- Urban Forestry staff, and City Arborists have some authority on trees, ***but have no authority when interdepartmental conflicts arise.***

- ***Key Barriers***

- Conflicts with other city departments.
- Lack of education and culture around street trees, both internally and externally.

LBJ Student Research

Rules and Regulations:

- ***Conflicting Requirements***
 - Utilities
 - Other departments
 - ***Key Barrier***
- ***No “One Size Fits All” Solution***
 - Cities that were most successful with street tree efforts tended to take a case-by-case approach to planting.

LBJ Student Research

Key Challenges:

- **Culture**
 - The internal and external city cultures don't view street trees as **critical infrastructure**.
- **Funding**
 - A **lack of dedicated funding** for tree-planting and ongoing maintenance was cited as a key barrier.
- **Interdepartmental conflicts**
 - Interdepartmental conflicts and confusion around tree-planting standards and protocols were cited as a key barrier in most cities surveyed/interviewed.
- **Planting space and infrastructure**
 - A lack of planting space for trees in proximity to utility infrastructure often prevent street trees from being planted.

LBJ Student Research Conclusion

Most peer cities surveyed have similar challenges to Austin's. When asked if they would like to collaborate and share knowledge around street tree efforts moving forward, the answer was a resounding "YES!".

The Vanguard Cities Network is a collaboration of cities that will enable rapid implementation—and early and visible benefits—from the historic funding commitments made possible by the Biden Administration's leadership in making these critical community investments.



NOTE: The 20+ city-strong, Vanguard Cities Network already exists!

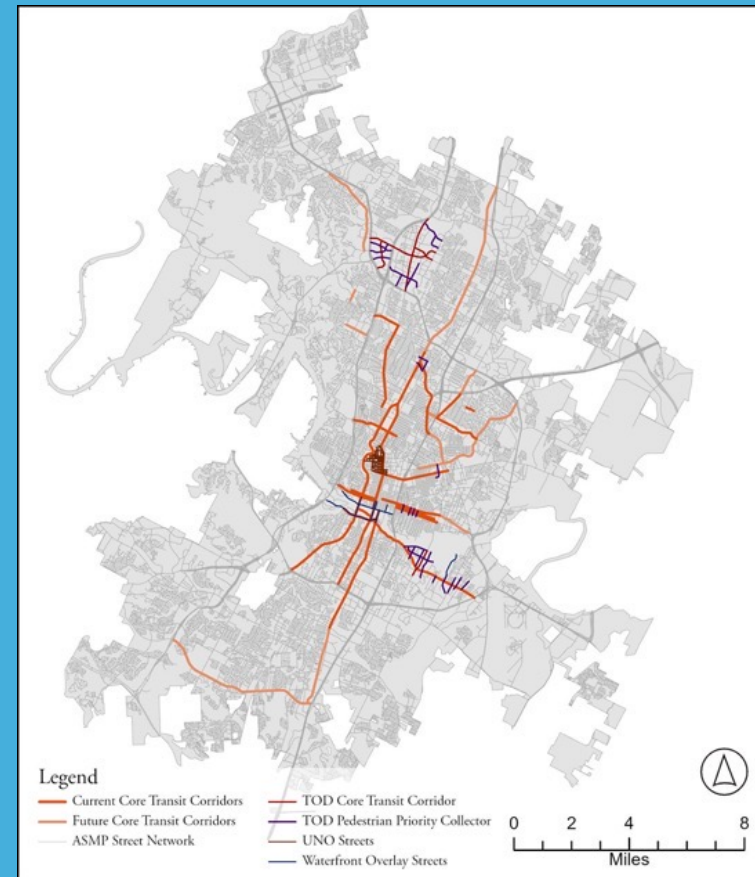
LBJ Student Research

Recommendations:

- **Evaluate plans for implementation.**
 - Austin's Strategic Mobility Plan encourages changes to ROW development to achieve a 50/50 mode split;
 - Move from goal to action with a resolution from the City.
- **Advance a culture shift.**
 - Foster civic engagement around street trees to garner community awareness and pride.
 - Denver's successful "Be A Smart Ash" program
- **Dedicate funding.**
 - Dedicate resources to both planting and maintaining street trees at least through their establishment period.
- **Re-align organizational structure.**
 - Sync activities across agencies to limit conflicts and streamline decision-making.
 - Create a central authority within the City to coordinate ROW design and management.
- **Regulations**
 - Streamline city codes and enhance street design standards to be more compatible with street trees.

2. Regulations vs. City Policies

- Private development is only required to provide street trees on **~2.4% of the streets** in Austin.
 - “Core Transit Corridors”
 - Certain PUDs and small area plans
- Where street trees *are* required, it is easier to get relief through the **“alternative equivalent compliance”** of Subchapter E.



Map showing the streets that require developers to provide street trees, per Subchapter E

2. Regulations: Rules & Criteria Manuals

Criteria Manuals are not Council-adopted code, so are often not aligned with City policies and priorities.

- These “performance criteria”-based manuals operate as **de-facto code**, often overriding real regulations in the LDC.
- Criteria manuals leave too much room for staff interpretation and discretion.
- The Utility Criteria Manual (UCM) protects utility’s interests over all other City policies, as well as the community’s interest in providing trees.



Examples of overhead electric lines that precluded shade trees in the ROW

3. Departmental Silos, cont'd.

The City's culture is change- and risk-averse:

- The UCM calls for a minimum of 9' between tree trunk and underground wet pipe, whereas most cities require only 5' of separation.
- Utility reviewers often play the "public safety trump card", vetoing street trees as they are "too risky".
- Executive staff is often unwilling to make interpretations and/or provide guidance that would make it easier to plant ROW trees.

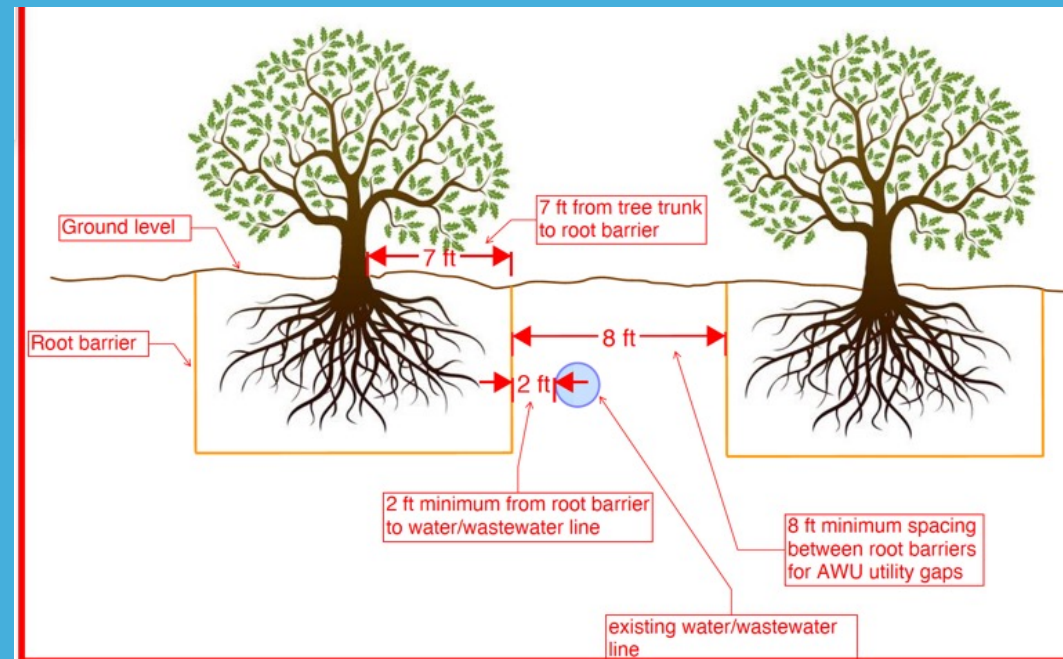


Illustration of current Utility Criteria Manual's distance separation and root barrier standard

4. Permitting: Long & Duplicative Reviews

There are ~40 site plan reviews representing ~20 different ROW parties, in addition to a License Agreement review that duplicates this the site plan review process.

- LDC and criteria manual language is often vague, allowing for varied interpretations - by project & by reviewer.
- Street trees are considered “temporary” and “non-standard” streetscape items that are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

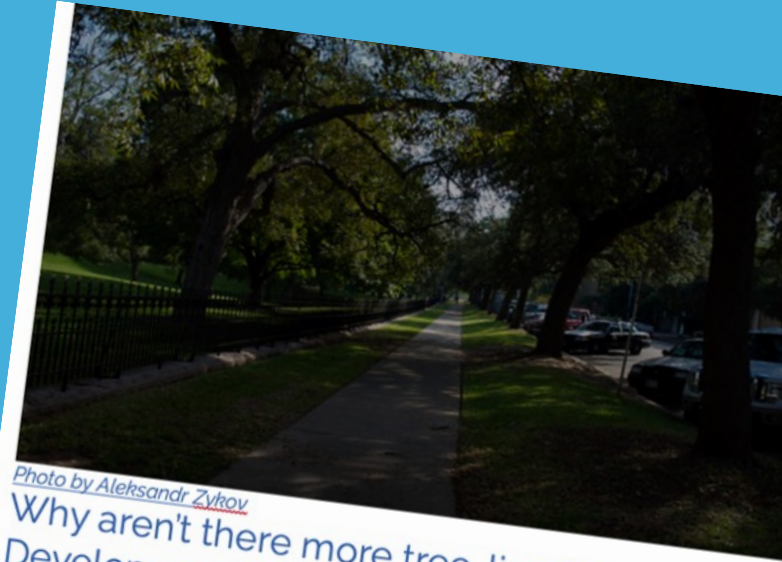


Photo by Aleksandr Zytov

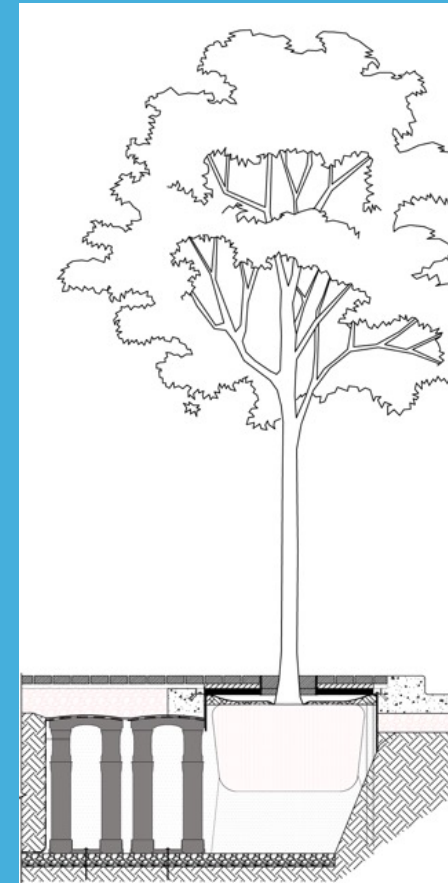
Why aren't there more tree-lined streets?
Development professionals blame complicated city rules

THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2023 BY JONATHAN LEE
Following the historic February ice storm that damaged over 10 million trees in Austin and knocked power out for 265,000 Austin Energy customers, city leaders are pushing to bury more power lines – a move aimed not only at protecting utility infrastructure but also allowing more trees to be planted along city streets.

4. Permitting: License Agreements

The license agreement limits City's liability for the presence and maintenance of ROW trees, creating a major disincentive to include them at all.

- The license agreement review largely duplicates site plan review, introducing possibilities for differing interpretations, new requirements, jeopardizing and lengthening site plan approval, sometimes by up to 2 years.
- **Trees must become “standard” elements in the public ROW, with City-approved species, sizes and planting details.**



This “special standard” tree planting detail is already in use in The Corridor Construction Program, that “suspends” pavement over root zone.

4. Permitting: General Permit (GP)

A GP, administered by DSD, is used by City departments, CapMetro and utility providers for public ROW projects, whereby there is “streamlined” permitting.

- Current GPs for sidewalks lack good urban design and do *not* include street trees.
- **Street trees should be a requirement for most GP projects.**



Manor Rd example of a GP “monolithic” sidewalk project with no trees and no ability to plant them in future where they’re most needed, against the curb.

5. Funding Possibilities

There are already COA funding sources that could be used for private and public projects for *both* tree-planting and maintenance costs:

- DSD's **Tree Mitigation Funds**, where \$4.5 million has been invested for the Corridor Construction Program & other projects
- AE's **Urban Heat Island Reduction** funds, where ~\$1 million is available annually
- Planning's **Downtown Great Streets Development Program** funds from parking meter revenue, which accrues to ~\$ million annually
- Create **new payment-in-lieu fee** for projects that cannot plant frontage trees, due to project size and/or utility relocation costs.

CIP Funding:

- Project Connect, Congress Ave UDI, I35 Cap & Stitch, Corridor Construction Program, etc.
- Future bonds could be approved for planting and maintaining trees, as well as for utility re-location, that could be orchestrated street-by-street, along with AE undergrounding projects.

Grants:

- TreeFolks, Austin Parks Foundation, Texas Trees Foundation, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS/GOALS:

- **LEADERSHIP:** Appoint an ACM-level, Public Realm Officer within the City to balance priorities in the design of our public ROWs and spaces.
- **REGULATIONS & PROCESSES:** Remove barriers to street trees and require them in most projects – *by code*.
- **FUNDING:** Incentivize both the planting and maintaining of **street trees** through access to the City's new tree supply contract, City's urban heat island reduction funds, City-administered grants, tree mitigation funds, etc.

Thank you!

Please submit a letter of support for this initiative and
the March 21st Council resolution!



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