



BOARD/COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

Joint Sustainability Committee

Recommendation 20250423-006: I-35 Cap-and-Stitch

Date: April 23, 2025

Subject: Recommendations for I-35 Cap-and-Stitch

Motioned By: Charlotte Davis

Seconded By: Isabella Changsut

WHEREAS, the Joint Sustainability Committee and the Office of Climate Action and Resilience have identified billions of dollars of needed investments to meet the goals of the Austin Climate Equity Plan; and

WHEREAS, there is not currently sufficient funding from taxes, financing, grants or other sources to meet all needed local climate investment needs; and

WHEREAS, climate investments will already be competing with all other community needs (such as pools, senior centers, and libraries) when bonds are put forward to voters in 2026; and

WHEREAS, capping and stitching segments of I-35 won't advance the goals of the Austin Climate Equity Plan because this strategy won't reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and

WHEREAS, capping and stitching segments of I-35 won't reduce local air pollution at the regional or neighborhood level;¹ and

WHEREAS, capping and stitching segments of I-35 will require a tremendous amount of concrete and steel, both of which contain embedded greenhouse gas emissions from their production, resulting in increase in Austin greenhouse gas footprint; and

¹ Neighborhood level air pollution could be improved if longer sections of the highway were capped and the air from inside the tunnel was captured and vented high into the air, but this would still contribute to the region's air pollution.

WHEREAS, the large fans that will be installed to run when traffic is stopped under the caps (which is likely to be often), will require energy to run and will increase the city's greenhouse gas footprint; and

WHEREAS, the ongoing cost of maintaining the caps will be a perpetual drain on already-tight city finances, forcing more trade-offs that will likely reduce funding availability for climate projects; and

WHEREAS, air pollution is well-known to be elevated beyond healthy levels within 500-1,000 feet of major roadways, especially busy highways like I-35; and

WHEREAS, the "park" resulting from capping the segment of I-35 between Cesar Chavez St and 4th St would be adjacent to 8 lanes of traffic on one side and 20 lanes on either end, making this a high-risk area for children, the elderly and anyone with respiratory or cardiac conditions; and

WHEREAS, the default I-35 design by TXDOT includes expanded and enhanced connectivity between east Austin and downtown to enable bike and pedestrian access; and

WHEREAS, the City of Austin owns or can purchase better quality and better situated land at a more affordable price that will better suit the needs of the community, compared to capping and stitching segments of I-35; and

WHEREAS, the proposed cap-and-stitch projects would only offer benefits to a very limited segment of the population that will be impacted by I-35 expansion that extends far to the south and north of the downtown area;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Joint Sustainability Committee urges the City Council to carefully consider the potential environmental, financial, and public health impacts of the I-35 cap and stitch projects, and to weigh these impacts against the potential tradeoffs—specifically, the other investments that could be made to advance the City's urgent climate goals and other critical community needs.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Committee encourages the City Council to evaluate how the proposed I-35 cap-and-stitch investments compare to other pollution mitigation strategies and community benefits, such as direct land acquisition, improving active and public transportation infrastructure, expanding tree canopy and green space in underserved areas (including in the full range of neighborhoods impacted by I-35 expansion), enhancing building energy efficiency, and increasing equitable access to clean air and water.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Joint Sustainability Committee urges the City Council to prioritize equity in all decisions related to the I-35 cap-and-stitch project. If a cap-and-stitch investment is approved, areas that have been historically impacted by displacement and disinvestment – including the 11th St/12th St area – should be prioritized. The Committee

encourages the City to explore whether this infrastructure truly serves those communities and to evaluate alternative forms of reparative investment, such as direct community ownership of assets, culturally rooted land uses, affordable housing, or community-driven green spaces. If the project cannot advance equity, repair past harms, and align with the goals of the Austin Climate Equity Plan, then the Committee does not believe the project should proceed, unless external funding can be secured to cover the cost.

Vote: 11-1

For: Kaiba White, Chris Maxwell-Gaines, Jon Salinas, Isabella Changsut, Charlotte Davis, Diana Wheeler, Shelby Orme, Marissa Bell, Alberta Phillips, Anna Scott, Rodrigo Leal

Against: Heather Houser

Abstain: Melissa Rothrock

Absent: Amy Noel, Chris Crookham, Christopher Campbell, Yure Suarez

Off Dais:

Attest:



Rohan Lilauwala, Staff Liaison