

Minutes from our September 15, 2021 HNA meeting

HNA President Coan Dillahunty called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

Coan gave an update on the golf course. At the latest Parks Board meeting in August, staff gave an update on the budget. The fiscal year ends at the end of September, and for the first time in a long time the course will be profitable. A record number of rounds have been played, and the course made a \$71K profit. PARD will come back with more community engagement opportunities after the final budget numbers are in, maybe October-November.

Treasurer Bruce Fairchild reported on our financial situation. Our checking account started with about \$4284, added \$35 in dues, spent \$250 for the newsletter, and ended with a balance of about \$4068. The money market account remained steady at \$2510.

Bruce moved to adopt the minutes from the July meeting and the motion was seconded by David Guarino.

Joanna Wolaver announced the upcoming Waller Creek cleanup on Saturday, November 6, It's My Park Day. Joanna has organized volunteer cleanup days in a professional capacity in the past. Volunteers should meet at the northwest corner of Hancock Golf Course and will go up and down the creek between 9 and noon.

Coan encouraged members to get in touch if they were interested in serving on any committees, such as parks, transportation or zoning.

Andrew Clamann and Staryn Wagner of the City of Austin Watershed Protection Department presented about Waller Creek's water quality and riparian stewardship. Andrew oversees the city's water-quality sampling program, and Staryn is an environmental scientist.

Andrew began by explaining the water-quality sampling program, called the Environmental Integrity Index. Its goal is to protect the chemical, biological and physical integrity of Austin's surface water – not just in the creek itself, but the entire riparian zone. This program monitors 50 creeks, and the quality of any section of creek can be viewed via an interactive web map at ATXWatersheds.com

The EII measures several aspects of creek health, including nutrients, bacteria and physical habitat. Nutrients are primarily forms of nitrogen and phosphorus, which, in excess, contribute to the overgrowth of algae and decrease of oxygen available for fish. In urban neighborhoods, sources of these nutrients include lawn fertilizer and waste from cats, dogs and chickens.

What can residents do?

- If possible, don't use fertilizer at all. If you must fertilize, apply the minimum amount, and avoid doing so before a rain.
- Keep lawn clippings and brush out of the creek (they cause problems as they decay). Try to mulch these or leave them on your yard, or set them out for the city to pick up.
- Scoop the poop, including in your yard.

The part of the creek that runs through Hancock is called the Waller 3 reach. Its most recent quality assessment rates it "fair," and it ranks in the bottom 20% of creek health. It rated lowest

for “contact recreation,” meaning the quality of the water for human health. Quarterly sampling has revealed e.coli bacteria, which is typically an indicator of the presence of other pathogens. In terms of quantifiable values of creek health, below 126 is “good” for e.coli, and anything greater than 399 is bad. Average values for Waller Creek are over 1000, so this is an issue. Culprits could include feces from wildlife, dogs and cats, as well as potential leaks in the wastewater lines that run down the middle of the creek. (The city tries to identify suspected leaks, but it can be difficult to pinpoint them.)

Another challenge for Waller Creek is “urban creek syndrome,” in which urban creeks fill up right after big rains and then are practically empty again the next day. In the lower reaches of urban creeks there’s often not enough base flow to support habitat for aquatic life, and the banks are eroded. Creeks outside the city tend to have more even, constant flows as the entire riparian zone absorbs and releases water. Urban creek syndrome results partly from impervious cover causing lots of runoff during storms.

How can we reverse that trend? We need to slow down stormwater and give it a chance to clean itself and soak into the soil.

- Use rain gardens – sculpt your lawn so it hangs onto water rather than letting it run off
- Use rain barrels to capture water that hits your roof
- A rule of thumb is to retain the first 1.8 inches of rain
- Plant plants with deeper roots. St. Augustine grass has very shallow roots, but plants and grasses with deeper roots help break up the soil and let rain soak in.

To protect the health of the creek we can also report polluters (someone throwing their lawn waste into the creek or a car wash that lets soap run off) via the 24-hour pollution hotline, 512-974-2550.

Andrew also encouraged us to support political leaders that support the environment, because sometimes the City of Austin is limited in the rules it can make by other governmental entities.

Staryn Wagner then spoke about riparian zone stewardship. The riparian zone is the interface of the terrestrial and aquatic environments and plays a critical role in the health of streams. A good riparian zone has a flat or gently sloping floodplain within 50 or 100 feet of the stream, with plants that slow down water in flood events.

Helping riparian zones improves both water quality and water quantity. When the land near the creek can hold water in the soil, the creek has more base flow in dry times. Healthy riparian zones slow down storm water, reduce erosion, build healthier soil and sustain base flow and life in the creek.

The city has made a major shift to help riparian zones through its Grow Zone program, which started in 2011. The Watershed Department has jurisdiction over the stream in the creek channel, and the Parks and Recreation Department has jurisdiction over the area outside the channel. At about 50 areas across the city, Watershed and PARD agreed that PARD would stop mowing for 10 to 50 feet from streams that run through parks. This has helped plants near the creek grow larger and grow roots that help hold the soil together.

The city and residents have worked on several riparian zone restorations where an amazing number of plants have returned to creek banks in less than a decade. The closest one to

Hancock is Willowbrook Reach in the Cherrywood neighborhood, and everyone is encouraged to go check it out.

Watershed has created a creekside homeowners' guide with best practices for creek health and recommendations for types of plants to use in landscaping. If you live near the creek and would like to talk about how to help, contact Andrew or Staryn at 512-974-2550.

During the Q&A, a question was asked about the use of fertilizer on the Hancock Golf Course. The answer from Watershed was that it would be good to ask PARD this question. We do know the course uses reclaimed water, which is high in nutrients, for watering. Watershed did a study on golf courses and parks that use reclaimed water to see what effects it has on creeks, and the stretch of Waller Creek that runs through Hancock did not show an overload of nutrients from that source.

Next, Stephanie McDonald of Central Health spoke about the healthcare district's plans for the Sears building at Hancock Center.

Central Health is the Travis County healthcare district, a local government entity with taxing authority that provides healthcare for people with low incomes who otherwise would not have access to care. Central Health partners with Ascension Seton and offers the Medical Access Program for people who meet income and other eligibility guidelines. Most of this care is provided through CommUnity Care Clinics (including the one at Hancock Center, which has offered Covid testing and other services during the pandemic). Central Health also offers the Sendero HMO insurance plans for people who have low incomes but are able to pay premiums.

Central Health has purchased the Sears building to consolidate administrative operations in the upper floor. The bottom floor will likely be transformed into healthcare space, perhaps for the provision of cardiology and neurology. The basement under Sears is no longer built out. Central Health will be working on the design in the fall, and Stephanie can update us when they are farther along.

Finally, HNA members discussed a response to TxDOT regarding its plans to expand I-35 through Central Austin. Hannes Mandel, Kitten Holloway and Robyn Ross are the Transportation committee and drafted a statement for the neighborhood to review.

Robyn presented background about TxDOT's process so far:

TxDOT's overall project is called the I-35 Capital Express and runs from SH 45 in Round Rock to SH 45 in Buda. The Capital Express Central section is the 8 miles from 290 in the north to Ben White in the south.

The Transportation committee has been working with NCINC, the North Central I-35 Neighborhood Coalition, which was formed in 2000 and comprises 12 neighborhoods focusing on the area from roughly MLK to Airport. Some NCINCers have been monitoring I-35 developments for 20 years and have been a good source of expertise.

What's already been decided:

- In response to community feedback, TxDOT is going to remove the upper decks and lower the roadway below ground level through central Austin.
- It's also going to add two managed lanes in each direction.

- Managed lanes = non-tolled but prioritize buses, carpools and vanpools.

TxDOT Public Scoping Meeting #1 (online), Nov. 12-December 31, 2020

TxDOT presented three alternatives and a no-build alternative.

- Alternative #1 The main lanes were lowered below street level, and the managed lanes were tunneled under them.
- Alternative #2 The main lanes and managed lanes were side by side, lowered below street level. In our part of the project this was 19 total lanes across including the main lanes, managed lanes and frontage road.
- Alternative #3 was the same as #2, with main lanes and managed lines side by side, but with “managed lane overpasses at Airport Boulevard and Woodland Avenue.”

TxDOT Public Scoping Meeting #2 (online), March 11-April 9, 2021

TxDOT did not present new alternatives but took feedback on the alternatives it had already presented. At this point TxDOT said it had received more than 2,300 comments, which included requests for it to evaluate impacts to community health and equity, consider other design alternatives including decks over the freeway or replacing I-35 with an urban boulevard, analyze climate change and greenhouse gases, prioritize safety, and divert traffic to SH 130.

TxDOT Virtual Public Meeting #3 (online), August 10-September 24, 2021

TxDOT has eliminated Alternative #1 (tunneling the managed lanes) because of concerns about cost and emergency vehicle access. In NCINC meetings and at the recent Cherrywood open house we heard that a number of people had preferred that alternative. TxDOT has not released the “votes” for each alternative.

Alternatives #2 and #3 both remove the upper decks and place all the lanes next to each other.

- In our neighborhood this is mostly 18 lanes across, including frontage lanes.
- Downtown, the plans show a lowered freeway and crossings at 8th, 7th, 6th and 5th as well as a train and bike crossing at 4th street. This adds connectivity between east and west in downtown.
- The only difference between alternatives 2 and 3 between Airport and MLK is that Alternative 3 elevates the managed lanes from the rest of the freeway to cross Airport and the railroad tracks there.

Right-of-way impact:

- Between 30th and 38th ½ on the east side the difference is notable. Half of the block between the frontage road and Robinson is taken for the freeway – this includes the Stars Café, the Days Inn, Escuelita del Alma preschool, Chicas Bonitas, Dreamers and so forth. On the west side, the ROW is significantly expanded to the walls of the Public Storage building, the Austin Chronicle, the Bank of America, and Dura-Tune.
- There is not a significant change at the Concordia site or St. David’s.
- It looks like one house at the end of 43rd is directly affected.

Next steps for TxDOT:

- Sept. 24 is the public comment deadline for this round.

- Fall 2022: TxDOT will present its “preferred alternative.” The public will have 60 days this time to provide comments.
- Summer 2023: TxDOT will present its “selected alternative.”
- Construction begins late 2025.

The transportation committee was informed by four main principles:

- TxDOT’s mission is to facilitate the flow of traffic, but the committee does not think this should come at the expense of other quality of life concerns, like the noise and pollution in our neighborhood, and our ability to travel in ways other than cars.
- Traffic gets very congested on I-35 and a solution is needed, but in many other settings adding lanes has not fixed congestion. New lanes quickly fill up as people choose to use them and additional freeway-dependent development is built. This is called “induced demand.”
- The committee is concerned about vehicle emissions’ contribution to climate change and the fact that the TxDOT plans don’t fully take into account the Project Connect public transit plan Austinites voted for in 2020 and will be paying for going forward. TxDOT says 85% of I-35 traffic is local, and Project Connect’s buses and light rail are designed to take local vehicles off the roads. As of March 2021, TxDOT representatives said they had not modeled the impact of Project Connect.
- Neighborhood volunteers are not engineers and should not be expected to provide a structural solution for I-35. But they are experts on what it’s like to live near I-35, and TxDOT should listen to us for that reason.

Kitten then introduced and read the statement and took feedback and questions, paragraph by paragraph.

Snow White and Coan asked about “stitches” (multimodal connections between east and west) and Hannes showed the roll plot map of the freeway sections and stitches near Hancock.

Lynn Saarinen suggested the addition of stated concerns about neighborhood traffic and noise, and Trevor Hackett suggested finessing the language in the action items. Kristene Blackstone pointed out a copyedit.

Beth Kelley moved that HNA adopt the statement with these changes, and multiple people seconded. The vote to adopt the statement was unanimous.

Hannes encouraged everyone to submit individual comments to TxDOT by Sept. 24 and highlighted an upcoming TxDOT public meeting on Sept. 30 as well as Project Connect meetings tentatively slated for later in the fall.

The final statement, as follows, was submitted to TxDOT by the Sept. 24 deadline:

The Hancock Neighborhood Association opposes TxDOT’s current plans for the I-35 Capital Express Central project. The schematics provided on August 10, 2021, reflect TxDOT’s insufficient attention to community feedback and represent unnecessary harm to north central neighborhoods.

Expanding I-35 to 20 – and in some areas 22 – lanes will induce thousands of additional vehicle trips per day through central Austin, offsetting potential gains in traffic safety, increasing emissions and noise pollution, degrading air quality, exacerbating health conditions, likely

contributing to further neighborhood traffic congestion, and obstructing Austin's Community Climate Plan target of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. All this for an expansion that will not relieve congestion, as stated by TxDOT's own District Engineer Tucker Ferguson in a presentation to Austin City Council on August 31.

We find these plans to be indefensible in light of the already unfolding climate crisis, which requires that we all think more carefully and creatively about how we travel. We also find them to be outdated, as they do not sufficiently take into account – let alone strategically integrate – the Project Connect plans for extensive light rail service and additional bus service that will reduce Austinites' need for vehicle trips.

We do applaud TxDOT's intent to remove the upper decks, which bring noise into the entirety of our neighborhood and exacerbate the division between Hancock and our eastside neighbors in Cherrywood, Wilshire Woods, Mueller, and East Austin. We also applaud TxDOT's openness to reconnecting downtown with a cap and stitch plan and adding pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

However, with only two "stitches" between US 290 East and MLK Blvd, and no definite plans for any "caps" in this 3.5-mile stretch, north central neighborhoods like ours will disproportionately bear the considerable negative outcomes of an expansion of I-35. It is already exceedingly difficult and dangerous for us to travel east to Cherrywood or Mueller on foot or by bicycle. We can only imagine the additional challenges posed by a 20-lane thoroughfare, including up to 4-lane frontage roads, no matter the particular design. What is more, the overwhelming majority of up to 147 displacements and 32 acres of right-of-way required for Alternatives 2 and 3 are located in north central neighborhoods, including Hancock.

In 2020, Texas Transportation Commission Chairman Bruce Bugg vowed that plans for I-35 in central Austin would be "no wider and no higher." With its dismissal of community alternatives and the removal of Alternative 1 from study – the only alternative that approached this claim – before the public was able to comment on it, TxDOT has not kept this promise.

Furthermore, TxDOT's Alternatives 2 and 3 are practically identical, leaving no opportunity for the community to participate in the project in a meaningful way. North central neighborhoods affected by this proposed expansion deserve a direct, open dialogue with TxDOT to develop a reasonable alternative that produces positive impacts for the people living and working along the I-35 corridor, now and in the future.

We therefore join other north central neighborhoods in rejecting TxDOT's current plans. We would like to engage with TxDOT to identify solutions that balance TxDOT's mandate to move traffic with our neighborhoods' needs to breathe clean air, travel safely on foot and by bicycle, and keep our homes and businesses from being demolished to make room for an even larger highway.

We ask TxDOT to heed our concerns and design an I-35 corridor that

1. truly connects us, instead of dividing us further;
2. preserves the integrity of our neighborhoods, instead of uprooting businesses and families;
3. reduces I-35's footprint, if anything, instead of expanding it further;
4. works hand in hand with Project Connect, helping reduce traffic and pollution, instead of increasing them further;
5. serves the needs, health, and safety of all Austinites engaged in all modes of transportation, of this and many future generations, instead of doubling down on the mistakes of the past.

The meeting concluded at 8:49 pm.

