Summary of meeting held April 6, 2002, 9:30 – 12:30, Blackland Neighborhood Center
Attendees: Stefan Schuster Cherrywood; Ora Houston, Blackland; Gordon Bennett, Cherrywood; Bo McCarver, Blackland; Mark Lind, Cherrywood; Linda Fields, MLK Neighborhood Association; Jeffery Skillman, Wilshirewood; Jay Velgos, Wilshirewood; Girard Kinney, Cherrywood; Michael McClendon, Cherrywood; David Baird, Blackland; Karen Paup, Cherrywood; Shekhar Govind, Wilshirewood, Dick Kallerman, Sierra Club; Neil Carman, Sierra Club; and Glenn Gadbois, Just Transportation Alliances

Strategy:

It was generally agreed that if we do nothing, the present TxDOT design will be adopted. By articulating our concerns, we may be able to get some concessions. Although there are different levels of interest among all parties for the spectrum of issues from the broad to the specific, it was generally agreed that all are important and we will be more effective in presenting them in a united group. We are not against improving mobility through and within Austin, but we believe the present TxDOT plan does not pay full attention to multi-modal transportation or to adverse effects on the environment, economy and adjacent neighborhoods.

The group agreed that ultimately it would be best to have an independent team of designers review the project under the direction of CAMPO. The TxDOT public meeting scheduled for April 25 will provide a forum for to present concerns listed on the attached position paper. We need to divide up the concerns and present them all. While Just Transportation Alliances and the Sierra Club will present the major arguments concerning economic and environmental issues, the neighborhoods need to reinforce those and present specific issues.

Several days prior to the TxDOT public meeting, we need to have a press conference and present our concerns.

Following the public hearing, we need to meet again, access the situation and organize to lobby the following individuals and groups with the goal of getting support for an independent study of the project:

U.S. Representative Lloyd Doggett
Senator Gonzalo Barrientos
Representative Dawnna Dukes
Representative Elliot Naishtat
City Council
City Planning Commission and traffic sub-committee
City Transportation Commission
County Commissioners
CAMPO representatives

We need liaison with:

MOPAC Organization
Texas Transportation Institute
UT –Austin Urban Planning Dept. – Susan Handy
Downtown Austin Alliance
Scenic Austin

We will need to present our concerns again at the TxDOT public hearing in approximately six months.

We also need to send TxDOT letters to be added to the official record that must be show to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

Position Paper:

Summary of General Concerns

The TxDOT plan is not holistic. It does not fully address its impact on the environment and economy of the region. It is fragmented and focuses on a single segment of highway without fully addressing broader, long-term planning issues.

Despite repeated statements and suggestions by adjacent neighborhood groups at planning meetings, the design does not provide for I35 to be depressed under the Airport intersection and does not provide for a direct connection to Airport Boulevard. These deficiencies will result in a noisy visual barrier and will increase traffic on 38 ½ Street and Manor Road.

Overall Project Concerns:

Environmental Issues

If the projected traffic, including a fully utilized SH-130 and commuter rail, will, as TxDOT has stated, require 18 lanes to accommodate vehicular traffic, would not the expansion to only 11 lanes have the effect of stalling traffic and, in effect, create a larger parking lot?

What is the impact on air and water quality of this project?

What will be the impact on the health of the Austin population as a whole as a result of increasing vehicle emissions from this project?

What are the effects on the health of the population living near this project? Will the health of that population be disproportionately affected?

As more highway expansion occurs in the Austin area, will it not eventually encounter the same problems with Clean Air Standards as Houston and other urban areas that have attempted to solve their mobility problems with major highway expansion?

Why do we design the freeway for 70 mph when such speeds are unrealistic during most hours of operation? Would designs for lower speeds not reduce the need to acquire major parcels of additional right of way?

The Federal Highway Administration encourages urban freeway design to be neighborhood-friendly. What measures are proposed to mitigate the increased environmental damage and cut-through traffic caused by this project?

Economic Issues

What is the cost-effectiveness of expanding the freeway? What is the payoff in improved mobility for the tax dollars spent? In computing the cost-effectiveness of the expansion project, what are the costs of lost mobility during the time of construction?

Given the shrinking supply of fossil fuels and the inevitable rise in the cost-per-gallon of gasoline and diesel, has this project considered difference scenarios for supply/demand of fuel? Will this expansion be necessary in 20 years with the costs of fossil fuels reduces the number of vehicles?

How does this plan fit into the overall mobility plan for Central Texas? It appears to be a fragmented approach that does not fully utilize multi-modal concepts to interface with other projected modes, as well as existing highways. As plans for SH-130 and commuter rail become more specific, this project needs to fully address those changes. If need be, the project should be delayed until detailed plans for SH130 and commuter rail are complete.

Will economic development in the low-income areas to the east be negatively affected by traffic generated by this plan?

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Safety Issues

The segment of I-35 through Austin is highly dangerous and congested. A single accident can stall traffic for hours and generate more accidents and pollution from stalled vehicles. How will safety be improved as a result of this project?

Designing for hypothetically high speeds increases the need for longer off-ramps that require more right-of-way. The Federal Highway Administration allows exceptions in highway design to accommodate local realities. The system should be designed for lower speeds.
Although many Texas cities have freeways designed for 70 mph speeds, almost none allow traffic to proceed at more than 60 mph. Why is the system designed for speeds of 70 mph when in reality that speed will never be allowed?

Elementary schools are located very close to 38 ½ Streets and Manor Road. How will the safety of children utilizing those routes be assured as increased traffic is generated by this design?

Problems with Details of the I-35 Redesign

The intersections with I-35 of US 183, SH 71 and US 290 provide major, regional east/west connectivity with SH 111 (Airport Blvd.) and SH 969 (MLK Blvd.) providing secondary connecting routes. The present I-35 plan would convert 38 ½ Streets and Manor Road into major east/west connecting routes. This conflicts with several neighborhood plans to the east of the freeway that call for minimal traffic on East 38 ½ Streets and Manor Road. Suggestions by TxDOT consultants to mitigate traffic flow on these neighborhood streets require coordination with city, Capitol Metro and CAMPO transportation planners and affected neighborhoods. That coordination has not been accomplished and this plan should be consider unfinished until all entities have addressed these issues. Much of this mitigation is generated by inherent deficiencies in the present plan. Specific areas that need further design work are:

<u>East 51st Street</u> should be fully utilized as one of the main routes to and from Mueller.
The northbound on and off ramps criss-cross just north of the Mueller HOV lanes and create a safety problem for motorists changing lanes. This needs more study.
<u>Airport Boulevard.</u>
The lanes should remain depressed under the railroad and as far north as 51st Street.
Proper liaison with Capitol Metro should be made to coordinate construction of the depressed design.
SH 111 (Airport Blvd.) should be fully connected so as to maximize flow of traffic onto I-35.
Full access across Airport and I-35 for Wilshirewood residents should be provided.
Reconfigure the off ramps to Airport assuming slower exit speeds.
There should be minimal encroachment so as to void removal of the Episcopal Church and houses.
The northbound off-ramp to Airport Blvd. should merge with Airport Blvd. at its median.

East 38 ½ Street
Reconfigure the ramp system between East Dean Keeton and 38 ½ Street to be closer to the main lanes. This will put the green space adjacent to the neighborhood and not the highway, and may allow combining the rear portions of lots to form useful perimeter development.

Manor Road/Dean Keeton
The design will convert Manor Road into a major east/west corridor only four blocks from and parallel to MLK, already a major east/west corridor. This will produce pressures to widen the existing lanes and eliminate the new bicycle lanes. The design will also stifle economic development in the new restaurant/entertainment district and isolate neighborhoods to the east.

Although the new design improves connections to the UT campus it will also greatly increase traffic to the east onto Manor Road and East Dean Keeton Street. This will have very negative effects on the new businesses along Manor Road. If the purpose of the northbound off-ramp between MLK and Manor Road is to provide better connections to UT, it should directly feed into westbound traffic. Other alternatives should be considered.
Relying on traffic-calming treatment on eastbound Manor Road traffic such a detour at Comal Street or sealing off Manor Road at Poquito Street are needless measures to correct a flawed design.

This area should be restudied to consider repositioning the main lanes slightly west to provide more space on the east side for an exit turn-around, similar to the present design onto Dean Keeton Street. The study should also consider lowering the off-ramp speeds so as to reduce room needed for such a turn-around.

Martin Luther King Boulevard
As this route develops as a major east/west connection to I-35, it needs to fully connect neighborhoods to the north and south and not become a barrier. Pedestrian and bicycle traffic should be fully accommodated and intersections should be signalized so as to provide continuous left-turn signals for vehicles coming from all directions.
The HOV connection to Red River at MLK should be restudied for safety. It appears highly dangerous in the present design.

Other Issues and Considerations

Population data used for projections for this project are different than those used by other planning agencies. Why are data used with such high projections and what are the underlying assumptions for population growth in the model?

The plan should be revised to reposition ramps toward the main lanes and minimize the taking of adjacent property. This could save several houses in the neighborhoods south of MLK.

Although the depressed design may reduce noise and increase east/west visibility, that change is essentially cosmetic. This project does not “rejoin east and west Austin” and the historic division will remain no matter what design is used. . The broadened bridges that better accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists are welcomed and encouraged throughout the project, however.

Billboards should be discouraged along the corridor.   Billboards that come down should not go back up.