



The Cherrywood Neighborhood is bounded by I-35, 38 ½ Street, Airport Boulevard, and Manor Road. It is a flourishing neighborhood of homes, businesses, and green spaces in Central Austin.

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September 23, 2021

Dear Mr. Williams, Mr. Ferguson, Ms. Fraser, and Ms. Rife,

We have appreciated the engagement by staff from the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) on the Interstate-35 Capital Express Central Project (CapEx Project) with the Cherrywood Neighborhood Association (CNA) during this latest scoping period. Thank you.

The CNA Steering Committee met on September 23, 2021, to finalize our third response to the TxDOT CapEx Project Virtual Public Scoping phase of engagement. While Cherrywood residents are enthusiastic about TxDOT's commitment to removing the upper decks, CNA strongly supports the resolutions and letters recently submitted by the City of Austin, Travis County, Downtown Austin Alliance, Reconnect Austin and many others broadly calling out deficiencies in TxDOT's process and current design alternatives for the CapEx Project. The schematics provided on August 10, 2021, reflect an inattention to community feedback and represent unnecessary harm to the north central neighborhoods that will disproportionately bear the negative outcomes of an expansion of I-35.

The CapEx Project section between Dean Keeton Street and Wilshire Boulevard is of particular concern to Cherrywood residents and deserves as much innovation, creativity, and perhaps additional funding, as has been focused on the downtown section. This letter amplifies neighborhood-scale points specific to the Cherrywood area that were initially articulated in our letters from December 2020 and April 2021, further explored in an open house on September 8, and a follow-up survey of Cherrywood residents and business owners (select results below).

Even as we stand with NCINC, Reconnect Austin, City of Austin and others asking TxDOT to refresh the design alternatives, we welcome further direct engagement with TxDOT and City of Austin staff on several key issues:

Improving community awareness and additional engagement opportunities

We reiterate that many Cherrywood residents have been engaged in conversation about renovating the I-35 central section for decades, and we live the reality of the highway daily. Almost all of us moved into this part of Austin in full awareness of our proximity to the freeway and its eventual renovation, yet there are still many who are still learning about the scale and impact of this project (Chart 1). We recognize that community engagement requires a great deal of coordination but is a fundamental and paramount effort when planning for generation-spanning investments such as the CapEx Project.

Indeed, this awareness drives our collective insistence that TxDOT act in better alignment with its stated aspirations for its process (for example, not precluding design alternatives before publicly releasing them) and this project (for example, a commitment to a “no wider” and “no higher” alternative) and actively listen and respond to community input in a different and more meaningful way than years past. TxDOT is operating from a trust deficit (Chart 2) that should be a core concern moving forward.

As a neighborhood, we are eager to work with TxDOT and the City to increase community awareness.

Revisiting design alternatives

CNA supports the calls from the City of Austin, Travis County, Downtown Austin Alliance, Reconnect Austin and others for a narrower right-of-way. We especially encourage TxDOT to pursue development of a narrower design that incorporates more cantilevered lanes in the Cherrywood section in preparation for “cap and stitch” options.

Designing the roadway for future capping and stitching allows for the real possibility of reconnecting east and west Austin neighborhoods with safe and inviting pedestrian, cycling, and vehicular connections. This is a critical accessibility issue for our residents (Chart 3) as well as for many other community organizations.

Cherrywood residents see minimal expansion of the right-of-way and minimal displacement of existing businesses (Chart 4) as critically important. This approach also creates more opportunities for future land use innovation.

As a neighborhood, and individually, we recognize that trade-offs are often necessary. One of the primary benefits of Cherrywood’s proximity to I-35 is freeway on- and off-ramps so convenient to our homes. While the importance of this convenience is decidedly mixed across neighborhood survey respondents, there is a general willingness to give up convenience of access to the freeway in exchange for design alternatives that minimize right-of-way encroachment on homes and creates a frontage road and freeway landscape more conducive to development according to City of Austin and neighborhood goals (Chart 7, Chart 8, Chart 9). This includes, but is not limited to, pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented commercial development that itself serves as a buffer from the highway.

A renewed effort on design may also improve how the CapEx Project begins to address the social concern of the interstate as a physical reminder—either as an elevated deck or a wide canyon—of historical inequities in the city’s development and daily functions, which our residents strongly support (Chart 6).

We will continue to be part of a large community coalition calling on TxDOT to revisit its design alternatives and we welcome working more closely with TxDOT on changes specific to our mile-long segment of the CapEx Project.

Maximizing remaining land for creative use

CNA’s preference is for implementation of an alternative with no right-of-way expansion, but as a pragmatic anticipation given the alternatives currently presented, CNA assumes there will be some impact to the existing right-of-way along the frontage road and on adjacent properties (especially Robinson Avenue). We encourage TxDOT to revisit the principles guiding the narrower footprint design of Alternative 1 and includes the greater possibilities for returning land used temporarily for construction to private owners or the City of Austin.

In the interest of land use design that will benefit Austin and Cherrywood, as well as TxDOT, CNA is developing a set of principles that would exemplify a best-case scenario for the future frontage road from Dean Keeton Street to Wilshire Boulevard being envisioned and designed as an urban corridor or central city boulevard, similarly to design concepts envisioned for the downtown-section frontage roads. The following principles reflect long-held neighborhood values and goals of encouraging vertical-mixed use and pedestrian-oriented development along all commercial corridors. CNA recognizes future land use efforts will be coordinated with the City of Austin and private property owners and not TxDOT, so we will continue to refine these principles through community engagement.

Guiding principles for land use

- Limit right-of-way expansion to only what is necessary for transportation purposes, leaving at least sixty feet (60') of depth from the private property line to the back of the shared-use path TxDOT is required to build.
- Redesign the northbound frontage road as an urban corridor city street or as a central city boulevard, with a design speed of no greater than 35 miles per hour and a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly edge that is more than a wide, unshaded sidewalk in the highway clear zone.
- CNA will work with private property owners and the City of Austin to utilize remaining property to achieve:
 - Development that itself forms a buffer between the residential area and the highway
 - Development of ground-floor office, retail, recreational areas, and community spaces geared toward providing services that will enhance the neighborhood as well as the larger community
 - Zoning that allows for housing over commercial, including affordable housing at a range of income levels
 - Green spaces and natural streetscaping that provides shade and buffering for pedestrians, cyclists, and non-vehicular motorists
 - Increased number of east-west connections across I-35
 - Possible re-subdivision of properties to allow for orientation to east/west streets
- Appropriate noise mitigation designed in collaboration with CNA and impacted residents

Construction-Phase Considerations

As CNA and the rest of Austin absorbed the details of all three design alternatives released in August, it became clear that each alternative appeared to require some amount of additional, expanded right-of-way for the demolition of the upper decks and construction of the new depressed lanes.

While we encourage revised design alternatives that require no expanded right-of-way for construction purposes, we recognize the strong possibility of negative impacts to beloved businesses on the frontage road, including Escuelita del Alma, Stars Café, Taqueria Los Altos, and other small, local businesses such as Dreamers, Le Rouge, Texas Gamers Lounge, the Zebra Smoke Shop, and more. In fact, residents are more concerned with existing business displacement than with negative impacts to their own property values (Chart 4).

This is a deep intertwined land use and social concern for our neighborhood. Regardless of final design alternatives, if the CapEx Project proceeds to implementation, creating a plan for the construction phase that is clear and fair to existing businesses along the frontage road is critical to Cherrywood residents.

Equity

As stated in our April 2021 letter, CNA continues to support the work of People United for Mobility Access (PUMA), Our Future 35, and other organizations that are focused on the higher-level Purpose and Need statements for this project, which many believe still fall short of addressing critical perspectives such as acknowledging the legacy of racism and segregation embodied in the roadway and committing to righting historical wrongs. While the Cherrywood area is predominately white and trending upward in affluence relative to the city, we recognize I-35 is a persistent physical embodiment of Austin's on-going struggle with institutional segregation and racism. CNA believes the CapEx Project can and should include positive community equity goals beyond mobility and we will continue to ally with and stand behind groups that are focused on equity goals.

Sincerely,
Cherrywood Neighborhood Association Steering Committee

cc: Texas Senator Sarah Eckhardt
Texas Representative Sheryl Cole
Austin Mayor Steve Adler
Austin City Council District 9 Kathie Tovo
Austin City Council Members

Chart 1

Which phrase best describes how informed you feel right now about TxDOT's plans for the renovation of I-35?

132 responses

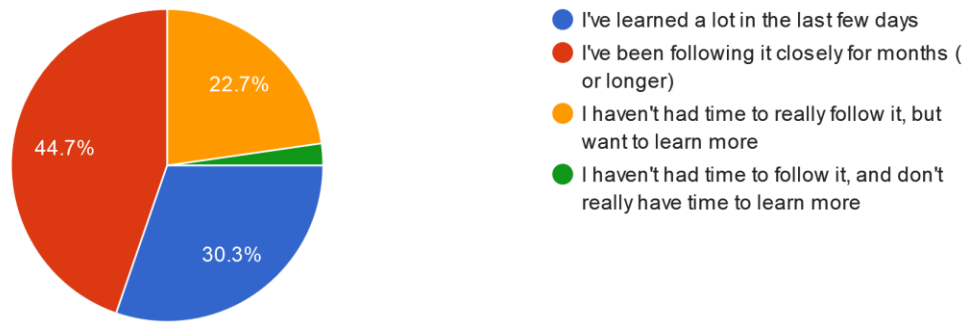


Chart 2

Do you feel TxDOT will consider your feedback when finalizing plans for I-35 renovation?

133 responses

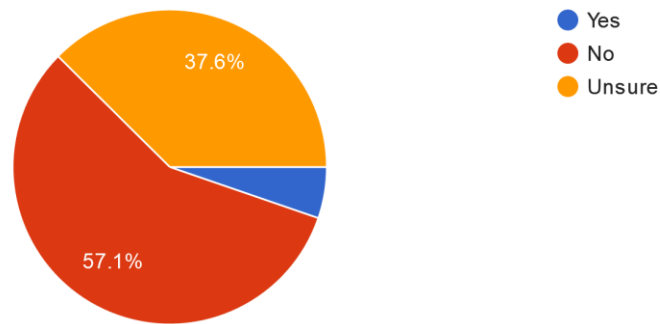


Chart 3

What ACCESSIBILITY issues are most important to you about any proposed TxDOT I-35 plans?

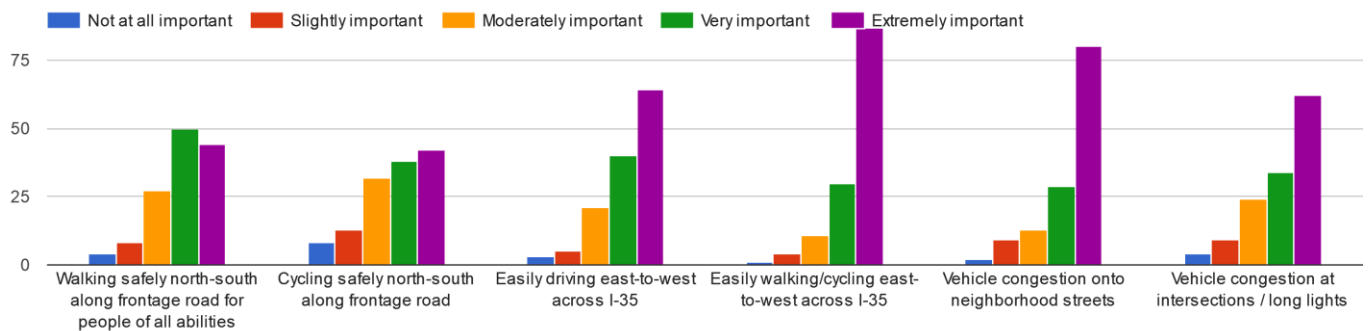


Chart 4

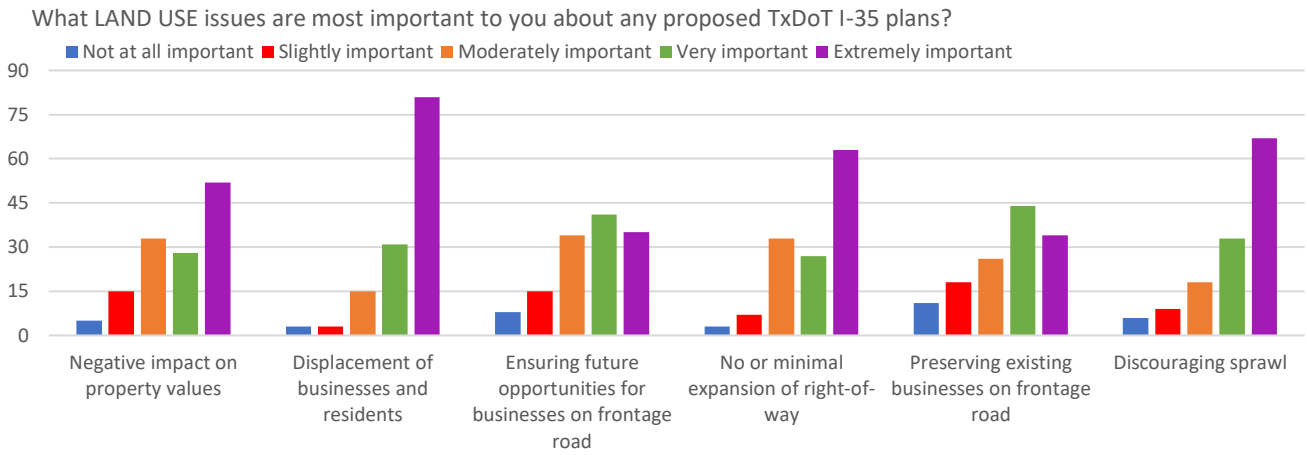


Chart 5

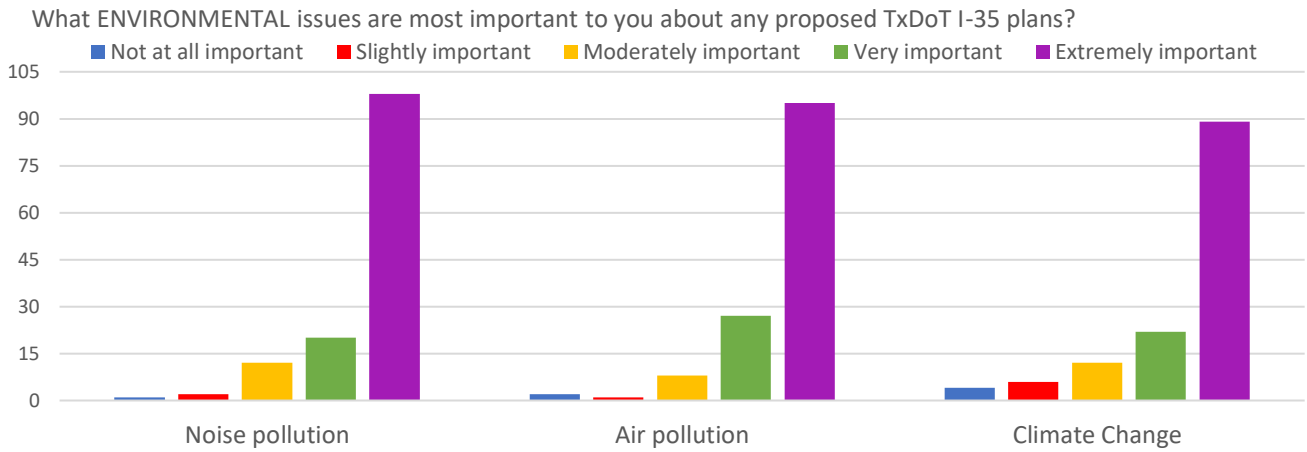


Chart 6

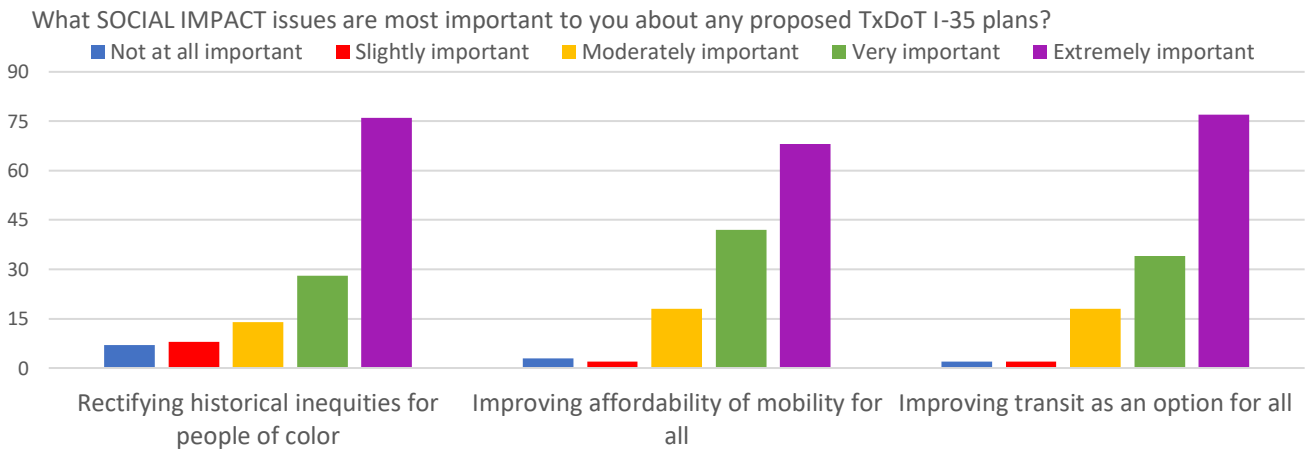


Chart 7

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

If a new frontage road allowed enough land for businesses, then I'm willing not to have a convenient access to or from I-35 in Cherrywood

133 responses

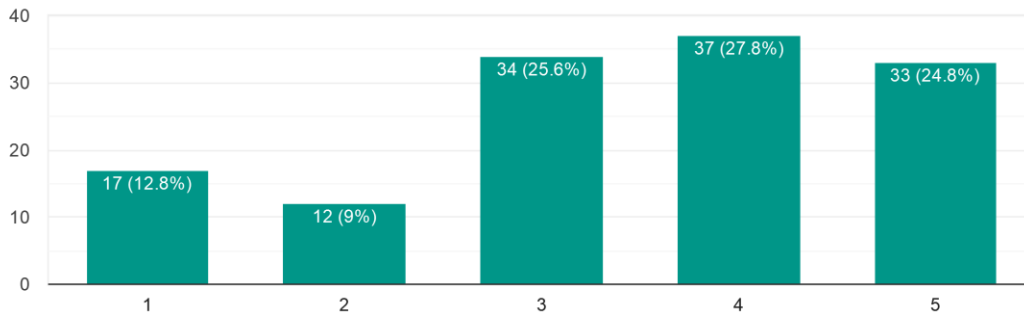


Chart 8

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

I'm willing to give up the existing on- and off-ramps to the freeway that are most convenient for Cherrywood, if that means the freeway right-of-way can be kept narrower.

133 responses

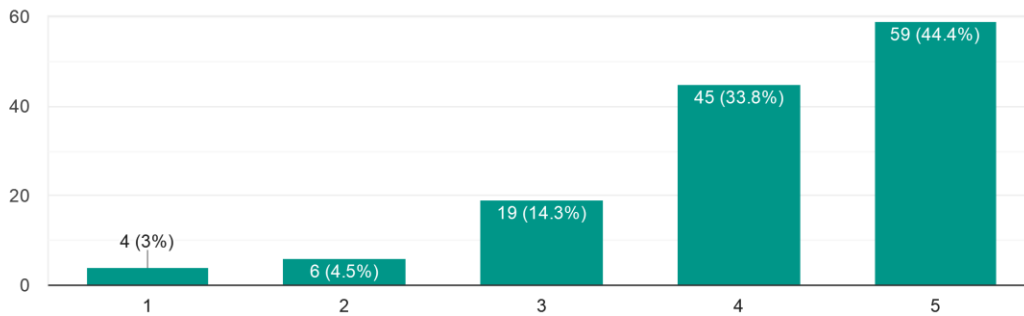


Chart 9

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

I'm willing to give up the existing on- and off-ramps to the freeway that are most convenient for Cherrywood, if that means there could be a cap and cover of the freeway in the Cherrywood area.

133 responses

