



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Howard Lazarus, Director, Public Works Department
Robert Spillar, Director, Transportation Department

DATE: June 10, 2009

SUBJECT: North Acres Trail Improvements: Background and Outreach Summary

CC: Sara Hensley, Director, Parks and Recreation Department

Executive Summary: The purpose of the memorandum is to communicate the staff recommendation with regard to the North Acres Hike and Bike Trail Bridge project, which was a contested portion of the City Bicycle Master Plan at the May 21, 2009 Bicycle Plan public Hearing. Staff recommends that the project remain in the Bicycle Master Plan as a Safe Route to School and a completion of a gap in Bicycle Route #57, and that design and other strategic actions be taken to address neighborhood concerns (further described in this memorandum). Staff has met with the neighborhood on both sides of the creek over the last two years and the design and infrastructure elements to be added will address the concerns discussed at those meetings.

Background: The North Acres Trail Improvements are a proposed hike-and-bike trail project to be constructed across Little Walnut Creek between Furness Drive and Park Plaza. The project includes the construction of a 10-foot wide concrete pavement trail and a 180-foot long bicycle and pedestrian bridge. The total length of the project is approximately 450 feet. The goal of the project is to provide connectivity across Little Walnut Creek, allowing students of Hart Elementary School (located south of the creek) access to the school from their homes north of the creek, and to close a gap in City of Austin Bicycle Route #57.

In October of 1992, the Texas Transportation Commission passed Minute Order No. 101588 which authorized the use of 1994 Federal/State ISTEA funding as one of the funding sources for project. In September 1995, after acquiring the 1994 bicycle bond funding as a match, City Bicycle Coordinator, Rick Waring began working with the City of Austin Real Estate Agents to acquire a recreational easement on the north side of the creek to provide for the landing of the bridge and associated trails. In September of 1999, after four years of negotiations, real estate and environmental concerns were addressed and property required to complete the project was acquired by the City of Austin via eminent domain.

The Advance Funding Agreement for this project between TXDOT and the City of Austin was executed on July 31, 1997.

Next, the project met with opposition from the neighborhood Heritage Hills (south of the proposed bridge). As early as June 2000, neighborhood opposition from the Heritage Hills Neighborhood Association is recorded via a response letter from then Public Works Director Peter Rieck. For the past two years the Public Works Department has been working with both sides of the bridge to reach consensus on the design and construction of the bridge and its associated approaches. In response to stakeholder concerns at those meetings, we propose to add design components to the project. Additional changes within the neighborhood since initiation of the project include investments such as the Gus Garcia Recreation Center and adjoining park, and crime fighting initiatives along Rundberg Lane. Moreover, AISD supports the project due to the savings related to the elimination of eight school buses and the related environmental and health benefits. Additionally, the project will allow students to participate in after school programs, and allow parents to volunteer during the day.

The estimated cost of construction at this time is approximately \$900,000. These funds will come from year 2000 bicycle bond funding. Thus far, the city has spent \$120,000 and has produced 90% complete design documents and is ready for construction. The additional design elements will add an additional approximate six months to the project completion, should the project move forward.

The following chronology shows a series of meetings involved the development of the North Acres/Heritage Hills Bridge project and occurred from March 8, 2007 to June 3, 2009.

Date	Activity
3/8/2007	Heritage Hills/Woodbridge Neighborhood Association Meeting attended by Project Manager Tony Krauss and Annick Beaudet, Bicycle Project Manager
3/12/2007	Planning Meeting with PARD, PW, APD, and NPZD
9/19/2007	Heritage Hills/Woodbridge Neighborhood Association Meeting
11/13/2007	Resident Meeting with Forest Park Apartments, includes DR Diaz from APD and Maureen Meredith from NPZD. Conducted in Spanish and English.
11/15/2007	Parent Coffee @ Hart Elem. w/Chief Acevedo, also attended by Maureen Meredith from NPZD. The Chief introduced himself and his ideas for a more active and involved youth. The bridge was brought up to the Chief and he expressed interest.
11/19/2007	Begin conversation with Brian Roe, and Commander Hinkle from APD
12/3/2007	Resident Meeting with Pebble Creek Apartments in Spanish and English.
12/5/2007	Meeting with APD, Commander Hinkle, Pam Mazak, Crime Analyst (APD), and Scott Stephens, Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) expert (APD)
3/17/2008	Meet with Pam Mazak to discuss criminal history in the area and receive an overall crime analysis
5/8/2008	Heritage Hills/Woodbridge Neighborhood Association Meeting – Annick Beaudet (PW), Nadia Barrera (PW), Commander Pedraza (APD)
4/6/2009	Heritage Hills/Windsor Hills Neighborhood Planning Meeting – held by Neighborhood Planning to discuss the Neighborhood Connectivity Division. Attended by Annick Beaudet (PW) and Nadia Barrera (PW)
5/19/2009	Neighborhood Connectivity Division field check of the bridge site and alternatives
6/3/2009	Meet with Lowell Rice, Heritage Hills Neighborhood President, concerning bridge development and alternatives.

Status:

Below is the list of issues identified in the two year stakeholder outreach process and how the City intends to address them:

Issue	Solution
Additional maintenance and litter control.	Coordinate with PARD to develop maintenance schedule.
Little Walnut Creek serves as a natural barrier to crime.	Studies show that increased connectivity deters crime rather than supports it. New subdivision under construction directly adjacent to the bridge on south side of the creek, creating more “eyes on the street/park.”
Additional safety and police coverage should be considered.	This is a budgetary concern and must be addressed by APD/City Council.
The dead end at Park Plaza and the intersection at Furness and Hermitage are difficult to police.	A curfew for the bridge/park should be established. Gating for the bridge could be considered. The park areas surrounding the bridge should be barren, grass only, to provide a clear field of vision from both north and south of the park. Lighting and skirting under the bridge (to deter activity under the bridge) will be added to the project.
There is a concern regarding the children crossing Rundberg Lane and the bridge safely.	School crossing guards will be placed at the bridge and at Rundberg Lane to assist children in crossing the bridge when traveling to and from school.
Create an alternative that is more palatable to the neighborhood.	There is no reasonable alternative to this project. There is a potential for a connection via a sidewalk along the IH-35 frontage road. However, the connection cannot be an alternative to bridge because the distance is too long for most students.

The **Neighborhood Planning process** for the **Heritage Hills/Windsor Park Combined Plan** began on May 22, 2008. For the most part, participation from home owners from the Heritage Hills and Windsor Hills neighborhoods has been good. However, the residents from the apartments directly north of the creek have not been participating. Therefore the Public Works Department is relying on feedback received from the two meetings held at the apartments on the north side on November 13, 2007 and December 3, 2007. These meetings, held mostly in Spanish, met with tremendous support and enthusiasm for the project and the potential improvement for the quality of life the bridge would provide. One resident in particular noted that the parent group from Hart Elementary had recently signed a petition requesting the connection.

Options and Recommendation:

Staff recommends that the bridge project remain in the City of Austin Bicycle Master Plan as an integral part of Route 57 and as a Safe Route to School.

Options include:

A. Keep project in plan and execute project and action plan;

1. Phase I- Coordinate with PARD to have the north side of the creek/park cleared. Begin addition to design features to the bridge design (lights, skirting, long-term landscape plan, possibly gating). Install No Parking/No Standing signs on North Plaza, adjacent to the park and in the area of the bridge landing. Finalize this phase by September 30th, 2009.
2. Phase II- Bid and Execution of Project- October 1 to January 1, projected construction to start in December 2009/January 2010 (this will be dependent on appropriation of remaining year 2000 bicycle bond funding for FY 10), otherwise construction will have to wait until FY 11 subject to Council approval of the proposed FY10 budget. Coordinate with APD, PARD, and Child Safety on the development of an Action Plan for ongoing enforcement and maintenance needs.
3. Phase III- Implement Action Plan for ongoing maintenance of the bridge and other elements related to assisting APD with crime issues if they arise.

B. Eliminate project from Bicycle Plan and the CAMPO Transportation Improvement Project (TIP) and return \$120,000 of funding to TXDOT (reimburse design funding already spent and remaining 160k for construction).