

# Waller Creek District Master Plan

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This plan is the legacy of many years of thinking about Waller Creek – what it originally meant to the city, what it has become, and what it can be in the future. It is an outgrowth of a community process that has brought together many different people with many different points of view, united by the common understanding that Waller Creek has fallen short of its potential and that now, with the prospect of future flood control improvements, it can be reclaimed and reintegrated into the life of the city in a way that is uniquely Austin. Creek corridors play a multiplicity of purposes and are therefore susceptible to competing demands which tug and pull for priority. In many ways, the assertion of one value at the expense of others characterizes the past history of improvements along Waller Creeks. Conventional engineering approaches have been utilized to contain water flow, stabilize adjacent property and render more “usable” land, resulting in a narrow channelized corridor. In other areas, physical improvements were used to create a “pastiche”, overlaying imagery not necessarily appropriate or consistent with the inherent qualities of the creek environment. Paths were inserted into already overly constrained reaches in ways that violated the spatial integrity, tranquility, visual image and appearance as well as environmental health of the corridor.

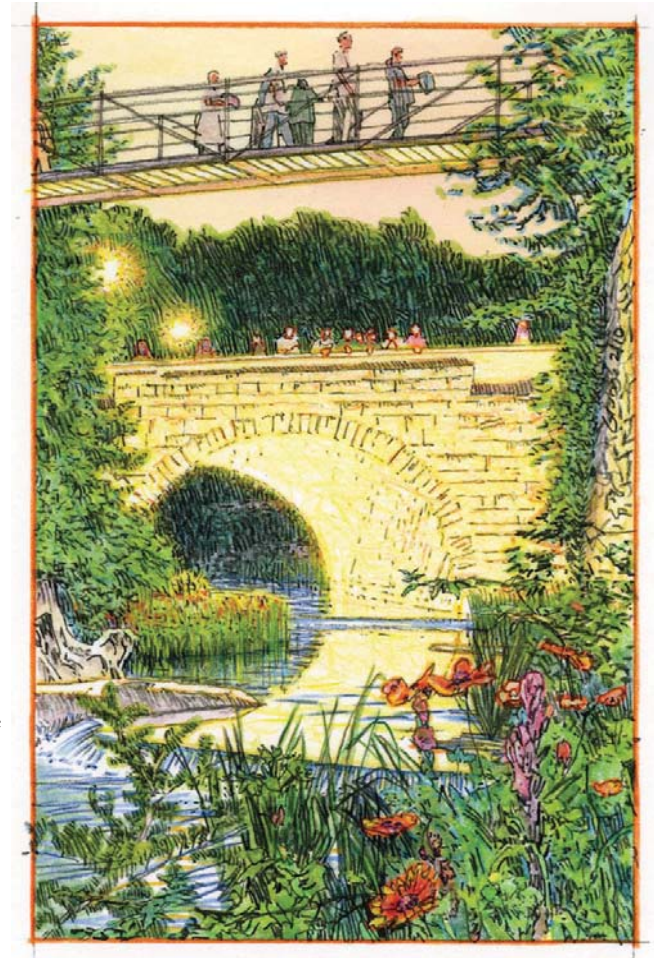
## Vision for the Future

Of primary importance in setting the direction for the future of Waller Creek is reinstating its environmental value as a natural feature within the urban landscape. The plan envisions the restoration of the ecological functions of the creek corridor and emphasizes its role as a living element with unique amenity value that can contribute significantly to the identity and livability of the city, and to the economic vitality of the Downtown. The image of the creek as a stormwater channel will be replaced as a higher priority is placed on ecological diversity and sustainability and on a sensitive rebalancing of the multiple roles which the creek serves. Eroded banks will be repaired and riparian landscape re-established where possible. Activities, rather than turning away from the creek, will be oriented to it.

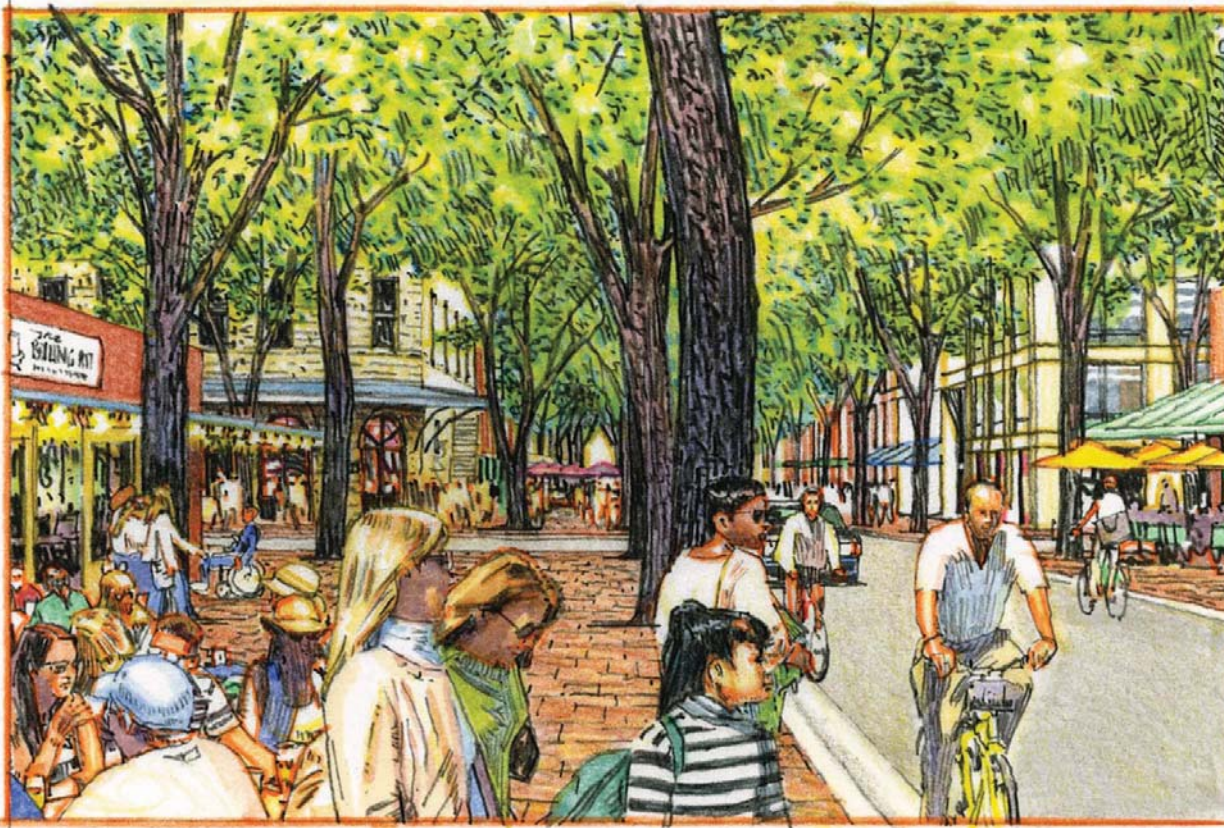
The landscape of the creek corridor will also be augmented by the parkland associated with it. Palm Park, Waterloo Park, Symphony Plaza Park and Symphony Plaza will be improved to reinforce the ecological identity of the creek corridor and become more attractive places for activities. Smaller pieces of parkland will be enhanced as attractive settings for outdoor dining and other activities that also contribute to the sense of landscape continuity. Public spaces along and adjacent to the creek will provide places for families to gather, children to play and people to linger and socialize. The open space vision that has emerged is that of a linear greenway that winds its way through downtown and that connects and extends the landscape qualities of Lady Bird Lake to Waterloo Park in a manner that integrates them with the adjacent community to enhance the urban environment and the ecological value of the creek corridor.

The Plan also calls for the improvement of pedestrian and bicycle linkages to, across and along the creek corridor to connect Lady Bird Lake with UT and East Austin and Rainey Street with Downtown. In undertaking the improvements, the Plan recognizes that the movement systems within the creek corridor need to be scaled and appropriately integrated with the desire to enhance the landscape and amenity value of the corridor. It therefore seeks a broader approach to achieving the pedestrian, bicycle and movement system objectives. Along the creek corridor, the Plan promotes a light-handed approach to the pathway system. It also recognizes the importance of utilizing multiple routes that allow some adjacent streets to become part of the open space system and serve as key elements in pedestrian/bicycle movement as well. In this manner, a more interesting, diverse and multi-faceted environment will be created, with each component of the movement system working together in an orchestrated manner.

The vision for the future is not to set the creek apart from the city and isolate it from its surroundings but rather to integrate it more fully with the surrounding urban life. The Plan calls for extending the amenity value of the creek, enabling it to be shared with the greatest number of people as possible. In the tighter portions of the creek, improvements are proposed that will reach out to embrace a broader domain with a more complex



View to midblock pedestrian crossing and historic Seventh Street Bridge.



*Sabine Street is envisioned as a linear promenade paralleling Waller Creek and serving as the principal trail between Third and Seventh Streets.*

and finely scaled system of pedestrian connections. More meaningful and important roles are proposed for underutilized streets, new streets will be extended and block patterns completed, and public spaces and parks tied together to create more lively and engaged places for people.

The Tunnel Project, along with the improvements of the creek corridor, will create enhanced opportunities for redevelopment. The redevelopment of the private and public lands adjacent to the corridor are not only an important step in providing the economic basis for the tax-increment financing district, but they are also important because they create an intensity of activities and uses that will help enliven the creek corridor and create a more vital district. The Plan proposes a variety of different scales and types of uses, from live/work and small scale buildings to more intensive office and residential uses and cultural/institutional complexes. Terraced dining is encouraged adjacent to the creek, where it can be accommodated in keeping with the natural slope of the banks and the riparian vegetation. A broad spectrum of new development opportunities will contribute to the diversity of living and working environments in the city, will build a population with direct interests in the on-going quality of the creek corridor and will create a vibrant and vital place within the heart of the city.

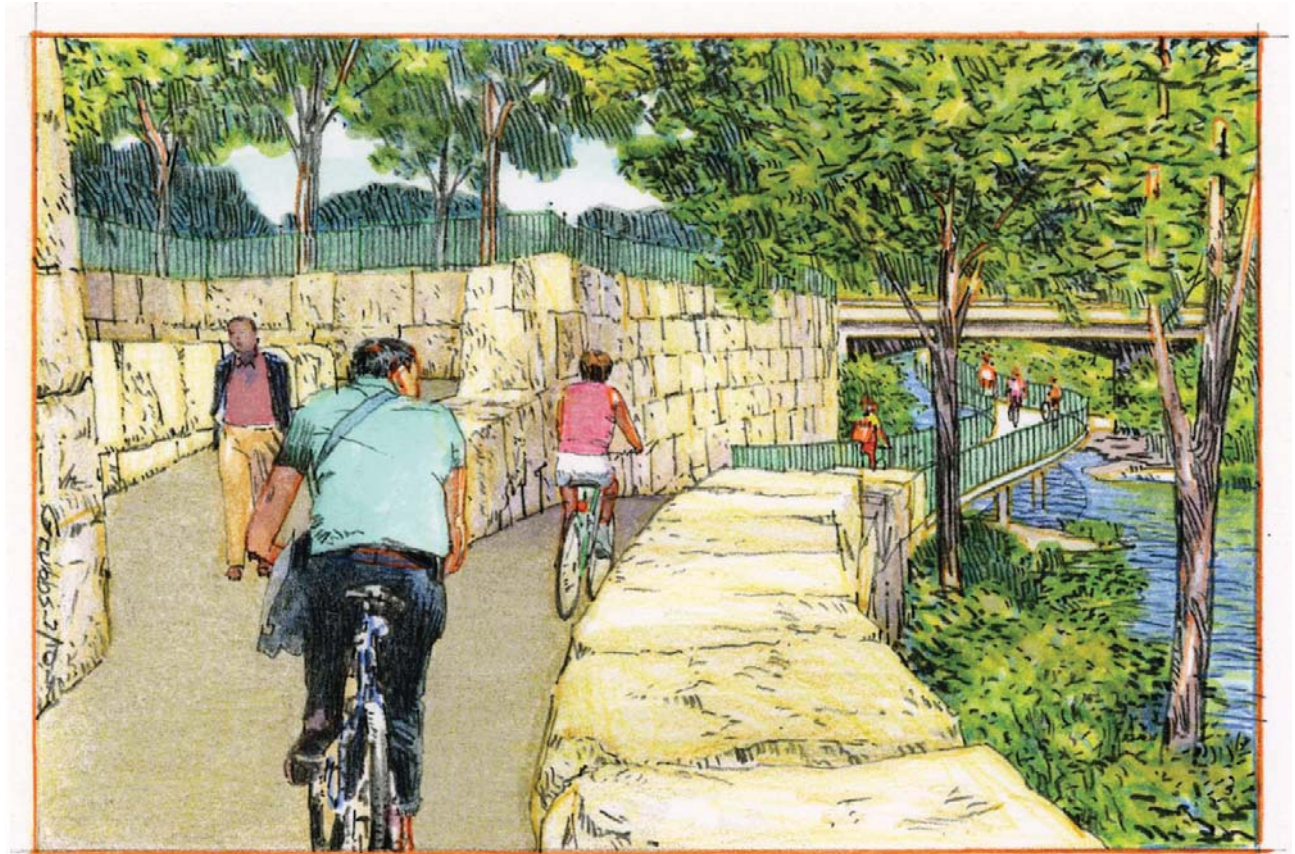
With all of these planned improvements, the value of Waller Creek will be extended well into the surrounding community. It will become a linear park and a positive public space that enhances the image and identity of the City, gives additional structure and orientation to the urban experience, connects and reinforces activity centers, and serves as an attractive destination. It will then also be a catalyst for redevelopment and revitalization, a centerpiece of a revitalized east side of Downtown and an attractive amenity that helps to overcome the barriers that exist between Downtown and East Austin. The improvements will bring newfound richness and meaning to life on Waller Creek and will help instill a sense of pride in the community that is essential to the management and maintenance of this valuable resource over time.

## Plan Summary – Reach by Reach

Waller Creek, as defined by the study area of this Master Plan, from Waterloo Park to Lady Bird Lake can be divided into five distinct reaches, each with its own unique characteristics, opportunities and constraints. These are discussed from north to south as follows:

**Waterloo Park to Tenth Street Reach.** Waterloo Park will be improved as part of the Tunnel Project, and become the northern terminus of the creek corridor. The parkland on either side of Symphony Square will be reconfigured to create a more positive relationship to the creek corridor. This will be achieved as redevelopment occurs on surrounding sites, enabling the existing surface parking lots to be relocated and for shared parking opportunities to be created. Along the creek, the Master Plan calls for the trail to cross at the Eleventh and Red River Street intersections at grade. In addition, due to the low clearances and highly constrained conditions of the pathways under these bridges, it is proposed that the pathways beneath these two bridges either be closed to public pedestrian and bike circulation, or be significantly upgraded with improved lighting, maintenance, and heightened security patrols. If closed to the public, the undercrossing beneath the Eleventh Street Bridge could still be retained for use by Symphony Square and its amphitheater, which will continue to function as a performance space and destination.

**Tenth to Seventh Street Reach.** The next reach to the south along Waller Creek, between Tenth Street and Seventh Street, is characterized by a significant amount of publicly owned land. Here, there is a major opportunity to create new public parkland and open space improvements as redevelopment takes place on City-owned parcels currently occupied by the Austin Police Department. These would open up and create more gracious and inviting public spaces within the corridor, punctuate the natural meander in the landscape, and establish an attractive setting for activities that extends the amenity value of the creek and its linkage with the larger city.



*The existing stone retaining walls and switchback ramp south of the Cesar Chavez Bridge will be restored as part of the trail system and linked with an elevated boardwalk structure to the north.*

*Seventh to Fourth Street Reach.* In this reach, the creek is channelized and the corridor tightly constrained. As a result, the plan emphasizes positively extending the influence of the creek environment and creating a finer-grain network of connections to it. The Master Plan recommends that Sabine Street be redesigned as a well landscaped bicycle/pedestrian promenade, interconnected with the creek corridor by a series of pathways, courtyards and new mid-block pedestrian connections. These mid-block connections will align with existing alleys and will link to pedestrian bridges to further engage the east and west sides of the creek and to improve visibility and accessibility to it.

At the northern gateway to Sabine Street, a new at-grade pedestrian crossing is proposed at Seventh Street, which is targeted for conversion to two-way circulation, thus enabling cyclists to connect to the Red River Street corridor. Along with the at-grade crossing, landscape improvements along the creek corridor will add to the amenity of the setting and recreational or dining terraces are encouraged to create a sociable and convivial environment within the district. The City could choose to retain the existing trail and undercrossing of the historic Seventh Street bridge, but this trail does not meet recommended standards for clearance, is subject to flooding in a 100-year event and does not meet accessibility standards. An alternative would be to remove the overhead utility pipe and build an elevated boardwalk and accessible ramp that would connect directly to Sabine Street. However, given the low vertical clearance in this location, even with the removal of the overhead utility pipe, it will be difficult to achieve a new trail that is entirely out of the 100-year flood.

*Fourth to Cesar Chavez.* The reach to the south of Fourth Street to Cesar Chavez lies in the shadow of the Convention Center. Here the Plan proposes the extension and completion of streets to re-establish a more pedestrian-oriented pattern with a stronger focus of activities within Palm Park. Sabine Street is proposed to be extended from Fourth Street where it intersects with the Lance Armstrong bikeway to Third Street. At this point the plan recommends pursuing the enhancement of several routes of the trail system, including a light boardwalk structure that would “tip toe” under the Red River and Cesar Chavez bridges and connect Third Street with the trail and creekside improvements south of Cesar Chavez Street. Here the City could choose to provide another connection to the boardwalk as shown in the option illustrated on page 39. An extension of Sabine Street is also recommended from south of Palm Park and extending across a new signalized intersection on Cesar Chavez to Rainey Street. Rainey Street will in turn then connect to both the Davis and Driskill Street trails on the east side of the creek to Lady Bird Lake. In addition, Second Street is proposed to be extended from Red River Street to the IH 35 frontage road. Day to day activities will be reinvigorated within these streets and public spaces along with opportunities for special events, fairs, festivals and markets that enrich the life of the city. The linear thread of the creek, the continuity of access from north to south within the district, the east/west linkages across the creek and improved activity linkages to East Austin will help to reduce the barrier effect of IH 35.

*Cesar Chavez to Lady Bird Lake.* South of Cesar Chavez, the plan emphasizes the connection of pedestrian and bicycle connections to the trail system of Lady Bird Lake. Though overgrown today by vegetation and only partially connected to the trail system along the lake, these trails feature massive limestone blocks that are extraordinary in scale and majesty, creating a fitting entrance to the lake that the new improvements will tie into. On the west, the boardwalk structure will transition from below the Cesar Chavez bridge to the trail and up the existing switchback to connect to city level and the front door of the Convention Center. The trail will also continue to the south directly to the Lady Bird Lake trail system. On the east side of the creek, the plan calls for two new trail connections at Davis and Driskill streets, to provide direct pedestrian and bicycle connections to the Mexican American Cultural Center and the Lady Bird Lake trails.

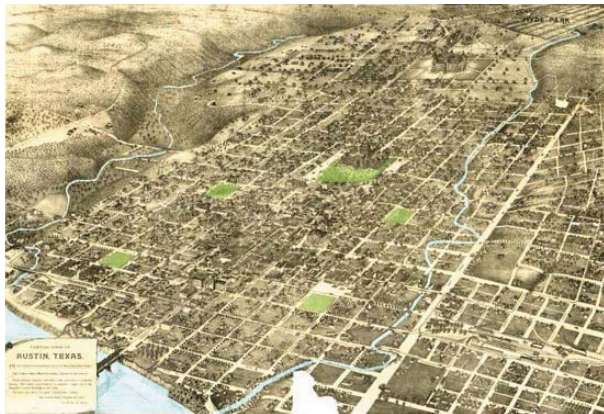


## 2. BACKGROUND

### Rivers and Creeks within the City

Austin's identity as a city has been shaped by its relationship to water – the creeks and rivers that flow through its undulating landscape and the springs that rise up through limestone outcrops and scourings to animate and enliven urban life. The original grid of the city as laid out by Judge Waller in 1839 was contained by the meanderings of Shoal Creek and Waller Creek and bordered by the Colorado River. As with most riparian towns, life along creeks and rivers offered great benefits but it also came with great threats as well. Primary amongst these were the periodic inundations and severe flash floods characteristic to the specific transitional climate and environment of Central Texas. As a result, flood control improvements were associated with the earliest infrastructural investments made by city leaders. The damming of the Colorado led to the creation of the chain of lakes, from Lady Bird Lake to Lake Travis and beyond, and the parks and open spaces associated with them.

Implicit in the plan for the city was the recognition of the importance not only of local streams, creeks and rivers in shaping its local identity but also of the importance of the great rivers of Texas in shaping the state as a



Austin in 1890, showing Shoal Creek and Waller Creek.

whole. As the capital of Texas, the city plan was intentionally designed to reference the topography of the larger state, with each of the north/south streets named for the rivers and laid out in geographic order across the new terrain of the city. Thus the original plan for the capital city was conceived at two levels – within the immediate local environment of the site and symbolically within the context of the state of Texas, defined and bounded in different ways by its waterways.

### The Challenge and Opportunity Today

Winding through the grid of streets, Waller Creek is a prominent feature that helped shape the historical evolution of the city. Once close to the eastern edge of town, it now lies within the heart of the city. But, despite its central location, the creek does not play a central role in the life of the community. Rather it is concealed within the Downtown, following a deep and narrow corridor that appears even deeper and is made narrower where it has been channelized. Periodic flooding has limited investment along the creek corridor, giving the area an underutilized and abandoned character. At the same time, projects that have been built in the last couple of decades turned away from the creek, locating parking and service functions along it.

Over time, Waller Creek slipped from the consciousness of the larger city and took on the trappings of neglect. Although attempts were made in the past to build pathways along the creek, they were not always successful. In the most constrained reaches of the corridor, they resulted in the addition of concrete stairs, pathways and ramps that take away the opportunity for landscape or that encroach into the natural creek banks and bottom. Some pathways became an attractive nuisance, leading people down to places that are unattractive, unsafe and unsanitary. The creek corridor became a refuge for homeless people who find shelter under the bridges and along the paths. Despite city maintenance and periodic clean up events, the creek is littered with trash and debris. Aging infrastructure exacerbates the problems of pollution, and water quality is affected by storm sewer discharges and the potential for leaking wastewater lines.

Waller Creek faces considerable challenges today. It has serious problems related to environmental health, safety and sustainability, image, appearance and identity, and connectivity within the corridor and to other parts of the city. Although many years have passed since Lyndon Johnson decried its condition in the 1930s, Waller Creek still remains essentially a negative element in the city, plagued by flooding, homeless encampments, pollution and neglect.

The decision by the people of Austin in 1998 to invest in significant flood control improvements along Waller Creek will be looked upon as a landmark event in the history of the city, comparable to the damming of the Colorado River in 1893. With this investment, there is an exciting opportunity to reconnect and reorient the city to the creek and make it the centerpiece of a revitalized east side of Downtown. When completed in 2014, the mile-long Tunnel will remove 28 acres of Downtown real estate from the 100-year flood plain. But, it is important to recognize that the flood control project in itself will not change Waller Creek's negative image and identity. In order to foster redevelopment and reinvestment in this area, Waller Creek needs to be improved as a high quality amenity.

The vision that has emerged is that of a linear greenway winding through the Downtown and connecting Lady Bird Lake with Waterloo Park and to the University of Texas campus beyond. In addition to a north-south linear park, Waller Creek is also seen as a positive public space that can help to overcome the barriers that currently exist between Downtown and East Austin. The linear greenway is viewed as a catalyst for new development, not only for properties immediately adjacent to the creek, but for properties within the surrounding area. In order to realize its full potential, the creek corridor must be cleaned up, upgraded, and improved in order to make it feel safe and secure and a positive feature within the community. The natural landscape qualities of the creek corridor need to be reinstated and the image of the creek as a stormwater channel replaced with a more ecologically diverse, authentic and resilient environment, capable of serving multiple roles simultaneously. In so doing, the value of the creek corridor will be extended well into the surrounding community.



*The planning process has included three Town Hall meetings hosted by the Waller Creek Citizens Advisory Committee as well as numerous stakeholder and focus group work sessions aimed at refining the vision, clarifying goals and understanding key technical parameters.*

## Community Participation in the Visioning Process

The community vision for Waller Creek began to be formally articulated during the Nation's Bicentennial with the publication of Austin Creeks (Horizons '76 Committee, 1974). This was the first document to celebrate the importance of Austin's urban creeks as the "green lifelines" of the city - calling citizens to action to restore these as a vital greenway network. Since that time, various plans and guidelines have been created, including the 1976 Lower Waller Creek Development Plan, the 1998 Heritage Austin "White Paper" on Waller Creek, the 1998 Waller Creek Charrette and the Waller Creek Greenway Action Plan (Greenways, 2000). As the Tunnel Project began, the Waller Creek Citizens Advisory Committee (WCCAC) was formed to provide oversight of tunnel and redevelopment projects. In addition, the 17-member WCCAC created a set of "Interim Waller Creek Design Principles" (September 2008) aimed at guiding property redevelopment pending the adoption of the Waller Creek District Master Plan—principles which implicitly describe a vision for the corridor.

In early 2009, the City of Austin engaged ROMA Design Group and its team of subconsultants to work with the City in the preparation of a Master Plan for Waller Creek. At the inception of the Master Plan process, the WCCAC provided ROMA with their aspirations and goals for both the district plan and the creek improvement components of the Master Plan, and this group has continued to be the principal "sounding board" for the project. The Committee has hosted two Town Hall meetings (May and November 2009), with a third and final community meeting planned for April 2010. It is anticipated that the WCCAC will provide the City Council with a set of recommendations prior to its action to adopt the Master Plan, and that they will stay involved to oversee the implementation of the creek improvement project. In addition to the Town Hall and WCCAC meetings, the City Planning and Development Review staff and the ROMA team have conducted numerous stakeholder focus groups and interviews, as well as technical coordination meetings, in order to refine the vision, clarify goals and understand key technical parameters. These meetings have included developers, individual public and private property owners, East Austin and Downtown neighborhood representatives, bicycle advocates, environmentalists, the Trail Foundation, the Austin Parks Foundation, University of Texas at Austin, the State of Texas, the Tunnel Project engineering team and key City staff from Watershed Protection, the Bicycle and Pedestrian Program, Parks and Recreation, Transportation, the Convention Center, Austin Energy and the Austin Water Utility.