

MINUTES OF THE CITY COUNCIL

CITY OF AUSTIN, TEXAS

Special Called Council Meeting

July 7, 1980
5:00 P.M.

Council Chambers
301 West Second Street

The meeting was called to order with Mayor McClellan presiding.

Roll Call:

Present: Mayor McClellan, Councilmembers Cooke, Goodman, Himmelblau,
Mullen, Trevino

Absent: Councilmember Snell

Mayor McClellan stated that this was a Special Called Meeting for the purpose of discussing the Congress Avenue Plan. The Mayor stated that any questions which could not be answered during the meeting today would be addressed in a City Manager's Report at the start of the Council Meeting on July 17th. At that time the Mayor felt that it would be appropriate for the Council to either reaffirm the Congress Avenue plan approved earlier or modify it.

Assistant City Manager Daron Butler presented an overview of the design considerations for the project. Based upon a corridor study of Congress Avenue, Brazos Street and Colorado Street between 10th Street and 3rd Street, it was concluded that reducing Congress Avenue to 4 lanes between 10th and 3rd Streets would still provide adequate capacity to handle traffic volume in the corridor.

Dr. Jim Benson, Acting Director, Urban Transportation Department, through the use of slides, reviewed the study of the Congress Avenue corridor encompassing both capacity and a traffic management strategy. Regarding the capacity analysis and assuming the lane reduction between 3rd and 10 Streets, the following findings resulted:

1. Capacity will be adequate to handle existing volumes without diversion.
2. Corridor capacity can handle from 2 to 3 times the current peak hour volumes.
3. Further capacity improvements can be made with reduction in pedestrian clearance requirements.

The conclusion was that the traffic in the Congress Avenue Corridor could be operationally managed now and in the future with four lanes on Congress Avenue.

Regarding the traffic system management strategy, the approach would be to encourage diversion to parallel facilities, i.e., Brazos and Colorado Streets. Operational elements would include:

1. Signal progression on Brazos and Colorado.
2. Left turns prohibited along Congress between 4th and 10th.
3. Major reduction and perhaps elimination of bus traffic on Congress Avenue.
4. Various traffic signals to facilitate desired diversion pattern.

Dr. Benson next discussed capacity analysis south of 3rd Street as follows:

1. No lane reduction proposed.
2. A significant portion of bridge traffic uses 1st and 2nd Streets. Traffic counts between 1st and 2nd Streets are only 55% to 65% of bridge volume. For traffic heading north across the bridge and up the Avenue, less than 50% of the trips reached 5th and 6th Streets and less than 30% reached 7th and 8th Streets.
3. Traffic control improvements in this area will be aimed at facilitating the desired diversion patterns, as opposed to any concerns with capacity in that area.

Shifting to a capacity analysis of the area from 4th to 10th Streets, Dr. Benson presented the following data:

1. Percentage reduction in peak hour capacities:
 - A. Corridor (all 3 facilities): 10-15%
 - B. Congress Avenue: Approximately 25%
2. Percent of capacity utilized:
 - A. Computations assume:
 - (1) Existing volumes
 - (2) Reduced capacities following improvements
 - B. Corridor utilization:
 - (1) Peak hour: 25-35%
 - (2) Peak 15 minutes: 30-55%
 - C. Congress Avenue 4 lanes without diversion:
 - (1) Peak hour: 30-65%
 - (2) Peak 15 minutes: 30-90%

Dr. Benson pointed out that before the City reached an 85-100% utilization, traffic could be doubled or tripled along the corridor before the facility would be utilized fully and experiencing congestion during peak hours. Today's traffic along Congress Avenue during peak hours could be handled without diversion, but with growth, diversion would be required.

In response to Councilmember Himmelblau's questions, Dr. Benson said that in May, hose counters were used to take a one-day count in the Tuesday-Thursday time period. Counts were taken at 15-minute intervals using a worst case situation to get a maximum peak-hour volume.

Mayor McClellan asked about the "No Left Turn" provision for Congress Avenue. Dr. Benson stated that initially consideration might be given to peak hour periods (7:00-9:00 a.m. and 4:00-6:00 p.m.) for 5th and 6th Streets. As traffic volumes grew, additional measures could be taken to restrict turning from Congress Avenue. Diversion patterns would occur in the 1st through 3rd Streets area. Changing from 45-degree angle parking along Congress Avenue to a 30-degree angle would reduce capacity in the outer lane by 50-60%. About two spaces per block would be lost going to a 30-degree angle.

Ms. Agnes Weed Abbott, who owned 915 Congress, expressed concern over the proposed plan to change Congress Avenue, and did not want to reduce the width of the Avenue.

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Ms. Ann Yeakel, Congress Avenue Chairman, We Care Austin, urged the Council to proceed with the plan adopted previously.

Mr. Don Abel, Abel Stationers, 500 Congress Avenue, objected to reducing the number of traffic lanes along Congress Avenue and felt that it would hurt business. He suggested that beautification be restricted to intersections.

Mr. Robert Schmidt, Yaring's, favored beautification of the Avenue, but objected to reducing the number of lanes.

Mr. Allen McCree, representing the Austin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, read the following letter:

"Having met with interested parties last Thursday to receive an excellent City Staff report and having previously studied the plans, we endorse once again Plan No. 1, which you have already selected.

We are, however, concerned about some indications of providing small trees in portable containers and in reduced numbers. It is our belief that numerous full-size, deciduous shade trees are needed for Congress Avenue.

In order for these to grow high enough to raise the leaf mass above storefronts, the full sidewalk width of Plan No. 1 will be necessary.

We therefore urge you not to alter plans or to delay from the proposed construction schedule. Inflation, additional design fees and staff time costs will reduce the amount of beautification we can purchase."

Mr. McCree then showed slides to demonstrate what he was talking about.

Ms. Nell Dickey, Traffic Safety Commission, supported the project, except for sacrificing two lanes of traffic.

Mr. Bill Moore, Chairman, Urban Transportation Commission, supported the plan adopted by the Council. He felt that going to a 4-lane section, effective capacity of the Avenue might not decrease since 4 wide lanes could be better than 6 narrow ones. In his judgement, widening of the sidewalks was crucial to the redevelopment and continued prosperity of downtown Austin.

Responding to questions from the Council, Mr. Moore said that he thought that the present 6 lanes were 10 feet wide. The Plan called for 4 lanes to be 12 feet wide, leaving a 12-foot balance. He felt that wider lanes and the 30-degree parking angle, the interior lane never be encroached upon. He believed that some 30-degree parking lots already existed in Austin, perhaps on The University of Texas campus.

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Mr. Robb Sutherland, owner of J.R. Reed Music Company, opposed the narrowing of Congress Avenue and questioned the timing of the traffic count, as well as diverting traffic from Congress Avenue.

Mr. John Gray, member, Traffic Safety Commission, supported Congress Avenue beautification, but not the narrowing of the traffic lanes.

Ms. Ari Wright supported widening of the sidewalks and planting of trees on Congress Avenue. She suggested that merchants use van pooling to provide more parking for customers along the Avenue.

Ms. Sally Witliff, member, Urban Transportation Commission and a member of We Care Austin, pointed out that the 90% capacity figure was for 15 minutes in the morning and afternoon with no diversion from Congress Avenue. She also questioned the ramp for the west side of Congress Avenue and the placement of trees along the Avenue. She felt that the same thing that worked for shopping malls in terms of creating people space would work for downtown Austin.

Mr. Jeff Geeslin stated that he had worked downtown for about 30 years. He wanted to see a study of people movement along Congress Avenue as well as a clear definition of capacity. He did not want to narrow Congress Avenue.

Mr. Phil Conard, who lived downtown, stated that decreasing the width of Congress Avenue and planting trees would decrease air conditioning needs. He felt that people would live downtown if the area was livable. He urged the Council to proceed as planned with Congress Avenue improvements.

Mr. Bill Clawson, who had worked downtown for the last 11 years, felt that it was the Council's job to provide for future generations in the downtown area.

Ms. Karen McGraw did not see how the peaking characteristic of downtown traffic effected shopping in the area. She urged the Council to proceed with the downtown improvements to enhance shopping there.

Mr. Douglas Stone noted that even with narrow streets in New Orleans the downtown area made a lot of money. He credited that success to pedestrians and stated that the same principle applied to Austin.

Mr. Alex Pope, who owned Congress Avenue property in the 300 and 400 Block, wanted Congress Avenue improvements to go all the way to the river. He asked the Council to keep his area in mind.

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Ms. Sally Shipman, an urban planner and member of We Care Austin, felt that any further money spent on studying the Congress Avenue problem and any further delay was a betrayal of the public processes and the trust.

Mr. Warren Beaman, speaking for Downtown Austin Unlimited, felt that the Congress Avenue crossways had to be narrowed, as well as a complete re-doing of the sidewalks. He urged the Council to proceed with the improvements as planned.

Mr. Chartier Newton, a downtown property owner, agreed with Mr. Beaman's comments.

Councilmember Himmelblau asked Mr. S. A. Garza to address the drainage problem on the project.

Mr. Garza stated that the drainage was supposed to be satisfactory as it was designed. He was waiting for further direction from the Council. Regarding Councilmember Himmelblau's question on curb height, Mr. Garza said that cross-sections had been prepared on how to satisfy a standard 6 inch curb.

Mayor McClellan asked if any of the drainage which had just been completed would have to be undone or redone to implement the plan approved by Council. Mr. Garza replied, "No." All additions would be to improve drainage. Interceptors would be placed north of 7th Street to head off waters before they crossed the Avenue to the east.

Councilmember Cooke asked how drainage would be effected if Council changed to the modified plan proposed today and what would be the estimated delay time. Mr. Garza replied that Mr. Ken Tunks, Project Director, would handle those questions. Mr. Tunks said that Public Works had compiled some answers to some questions, one of which was the delay time for various alternatives. Regarding drainage, water would be intercepted much in the same manner as was presently proposed with the exception that on the west side if islands were placed out in the traffic or parking lane, additional inlets would be required. The project could go to bid in September, 1980.

In response to Councilmember Cooke's question, Mr. Tunks said that if the Council went to an alternate solution, there would be a delay from September to March.

Responding to Mr. Sutherland's question, Assistant City Manager Butler said that construction would begin in January--not during the height of the Christmas shopping season.

Councilmember Himmelblau asked about a traffic count on Monday and Friday on Congress Avenue. Mr. Butler said that the count could be done with no problem.

John German, Director of Public Works said that Mr. Gray's proposal was Option 5 on Attachment "A" which is as follows:

Widen sidewalk at corners only, 6-traffic lanes, tree island in mid-block (Phase 1 modified) - Estimated cost \$1.1 million; estimated bid date March, 1981.

In response to Mayor McClellan's question, Mr. Butler said that there was no current pedestrian count for Congress Avenue. The last count was as part of the study that followed the initial corner modifications on 11th Street.

Regarding the definition of "capacity", Dr. Benson said that it simply was the maximum number of vehicles which could be moved through the area. The critical capacity area was the signalized intersections.

There was discussion regarding the reduction or removal of buses from Congress Avenue. Mr. Bill Moore pointed out some of the problems involved with removing the buses, such as transfer problems.

Ms. Witliff said that every suggestion imaginable had been presented to the Urban Transportation Commission regarding the handling of transportation matters on Congress Avenue. Their solution was a combination of some transit, some automobile and some pedestrian.

Mr. Gray stated that the last time the voters voted for Congress Avenue improvements they had voted in essence for Phase I, which was presented as a demonstration project which would be continued down the Avenue. They did not vote to narrow Congress Avenue. He suspected that if the issue were presented as a referendum (to narrow Congress Avenue) to the voters that it would be defeated resoundingly. He asked why not proceed to implement Phase I which the voters had voted for and not create additional problems. Council-member Cooke disagreed with Mr. Gray.

City Manager Davidson pointed out that there was considerable criticism of Phase I right after it was completed. He did not recall that it was held up as any kind of model that would be used up and down the Avenue. However, he would document what was actually presented to the voters.

Ms. Witliff reminded the Council that prior to the public hearing last summer, former Urban Transportation Department Director, Joe Ternus, sent out over 275 letters to members of Downtown Unlimited, merchants up and down Congress Avenue, property owners up and down Congress Avenue and members of various interested groups to attend a meeting of the Urban Transportation Commission where five solutions to the Congress Avenue problem would be presented and discussed. Many people attended the meeting, which was held in the board room of the Austin National Bank Building.

Councilmember Mullen agreed with Ms. Witliff that the meeting was well-publicized.

Mayor McClellan felt that the crux of the problem was whether Congress Avenue was to be 4 or 6 lanes. There was general agreement regarding the need for improvements.

ADJOURNMENT

The Council adjourned at 7:11 p.m.

APPROVED

Charles Keeton McClellan
Mayor

ATTEST:

Grace Monica

City Clerk