Part 1: Town Lake

INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS OF EXISTING CONDITIONS—TOWN LAKE

A resource inventory and analysis was conducted during the summer of 1985 by staff and the Town Lake Task Force to examine existing conditions of the Town Lake Corridor. The purpose of this effort was to gather as much information as possible within a short period of time, draw conclusions and identify issues, and provide a basis for developing goals and policy recommendations for future public and private decisions. It is important to recognize that such an overall assessment has not been made since the *Town Lake Comprehensive Plan* was developed in 1968.

This assessment does not represent a comprehensive evaluation of the Corridor. In fact, a major objective was to identify gaps in the information base, thereby concentrating on major issues and problems as a framework for immediate strengthening of land use policy. In addition, this effort represents an initiative for future comprehensive planning.

Criteria for conducting the assessment were focused on waterfront compatibility standards and existing resource values in the Corridor.

Physical Context

Town Lake is one of the most dramatic natural resources in the City of Austin, centrally located south of the Central Business District and stretching six miles from dam to dam on the Colorado River.

The Town Lake waterfront is unique, created by impoundment only 25 years ago, ringed by parkland along its banks, and yet without the encumbrances of a working waterfront and associated land use problems of warehouses, railroads and factories that impact older cities. Sewage treatment facilities are located below the reservoir.

For the most part it is a constant level lake and therefore presents no major constraints to shoreline use and development, although awareness of flood plain elevations is required because of the potential for flood control release.

Its central location and proximity to inner city neighborhoods, to parks and greenbelts, downtown, and the State Capitol, provide a magnificent opportunity to create a Great Central Park as the centerpiece for innovative urban design in a rapidly growing and changing metropolitan area.

To accomplish such a goal, however, requires an understanding of the complexity of the Corridor: linear shape of the lake in the heart of the city, intensification of a vibrant downtown, protection of adjacent neighborhoods, need for adequate transportation, preservation of open space values, maintaining water quality, and the demand for appropriate, diverse recreation experiences. Special expertise of a multi-disciplinary nature will be required to appropriately address these dynamics.

Land Use/Zoning/Circulation

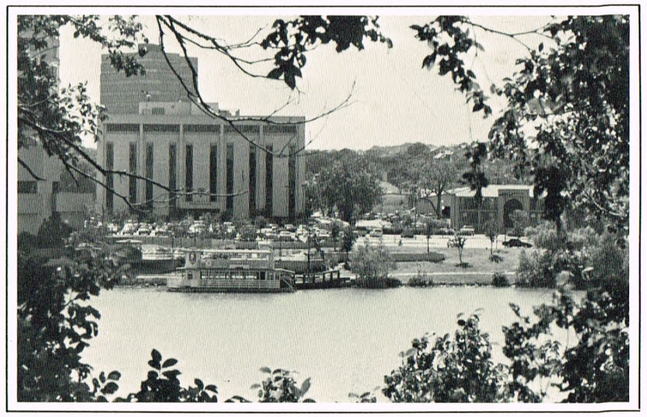
Land use and zoning patterns in the Town Lake Corridor generally do not reflect sensitivity to the scenic, recreational and economic values of the waterfront. A grid street design creates the predominant fabric for development. The lake itself does little to influence and guide land use resulting in defensive attempts to protect the lake, its vast parklands and neighborhoods. A vague and weak lake overlay zone covers only lower downtown on the north bank. Existing zoning generally favors densities that are too high and land uses that are not appropriate for a waterfront environment. Clearly, land use is influenced by the market place without the benefit of comprehensive urban design and an attendant guidance system.

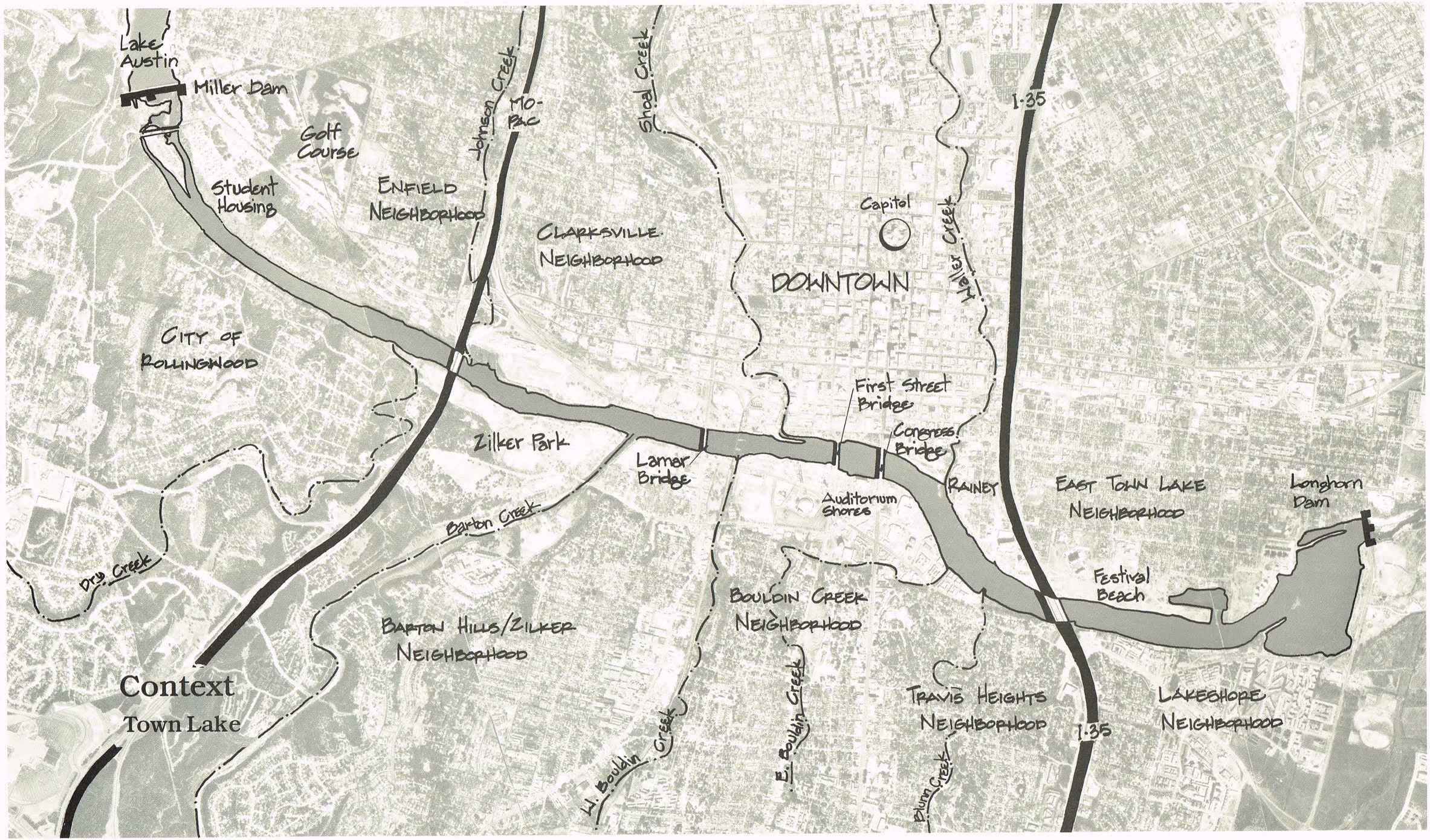
Land Use Patterns—The Town Lake Corridor has a pattern of both public and private land uses. The Corridor contains a total of approximately 1997 acres. Of this, 1125 acres or 56 percent is in public ownership. Approximately 754 acres or 38 percent of the Corridor is in the form of parkland.

Major public uses located on the north shore include the University of Texas property which consists of a research laboratory and student housing. Three power plants are also located on the north shore. Zilker Park represents a significant public use area on the south shore.

The private/commercial uses along the waters edge are predominantly residential, restaurant, hotel and office. Large hotels and office complexes are concentrated downtown and just south of downtown across Town Lake.

The urban edge—where privately-owned land meets parkland or lakeshore streets is undergoing rapid change and development. The lower downtown area has begun a redevelopment embroidery that includes high rise office towers and hotels, condominiums, and the proposed City Hall public/private complex. Development pressures are also evident in the Rainey Neighborhood, on the Balcones rock cliffs, and along the south shore including Barton Springs Road and Riverside Drive areas adjacent to South Austin neighborhoods. Siting of a recently proposed civic and





Context

Town Lake

convention center has become a polarizing issue between park preservationists and the development community based on concerns for compatibility, traffic and development spinoff that might impact neighborhoods.

Land Use Suitability—Suitability analysis of an urban waterfront requires application of land use principles to determine if development is in harmony and sympathy with the lake environment. Criteria used for this study focused on waterfront-dependent, waterfront-related and pedestrian oriented land use objectives.

Much of the land use in the Town Lake Corridor can be described as singular, monotonous and unexciting. Little encouragement or direction has been given to achieve a design framework for appropriate waterfront animation (active edge), contextual architectural style, and pedestrian orientation of buildings. Given the present trend, office buildings and surface parking could ultimately dominate the landscape, creating an even more harsh environment for the pedestrian. Conspicuously absent are civic and cultural facilities that are found in great waterfront cities.

Misfits include parking garages, surface parking and service docks along the shoreline; apartments, hotels and associated amenities only a few feet from the waters edge; land uses which are not waterfront dependent (offices); homes perched on the edge of the Balcones rock cliffs, and building design that is not sympathetic with the lake context.

Other land uses are strikingly out of place: the Street and Bridge Yard, single-purpose ballfields, a major newspaper complex, mobile homes, warehousing and manufacturing, outdoor storage at the Holly Power Plant and other locations, a mix of unrelated uses between Barton Creek and South Lamar Boulevard, strip commerical development on South Lamar, a high school complex and an animal shelter.

The largest undeveloped waterfront and natural area, the University of Texas Biological Research Lab, is off-limits to the public. There is also speculation that the valuable property is being eyed by University officials as a means of generating revenue.

Land occupied by the auditorium and coliseum does not reflect high standards for a public waterfront. Extensive surface parking, lack of landscaping, and the haphazard use of a portion of the land is apparent.

Opportunities to correct many of these deficiencies will arise as both redevelopment and new development respond to a highly valued and dynamic lake environment. For example, landowners in the Rainey neighborhood appeared to be less interested in neighborhood preservation and more inclined to participate in downtown development.

Circulation—An increase in traffic generated by new development both inside and outside the Corridor is creating the potential for major circulation problems and conflicts. While north-south traffic flows along four arterials and two freeways, east-west traffic is constrained by lack of a major thoroughfare in the central city connecting those freeways. Of particular concern is the likelihood of proposals that will recommend multi-lane roadways on one or both sides of the lake that could severely impact the Town Lake waterfront and other public open spaces in the Corridor. A need is apparent for comprehensive planning that would address a number of complex issues including preservation of public access to the waterfront, pedestrian access throughout the Corridor, neighborhood impact, parking and impact on parks and creeks. A number of transportation studies and capital improvement projects are addressing roadway problems and bridge crossings, but these appear to be taking place without the benefit of comprehensive land use planning for both downtown and the Town Lake Corridor.

In 1968, prior to construction of MoPac, the Parks Board expressed concern that an east-west thoroughfare might seal off the waterfront from downtown. Today, those fears are well-founded because West First Street is a major barrier and poses design constraints for the new City Hall mixed use project and other developments to develop suitable connections with the waterfront.

Approved Town Lake Transportation Improvements

E. Riverside Drive—realignment East of I-35

Congress Avenue—completion of beautification plan

Grove Boulevard—new roadway to U.S. 183

S. First Street—reconstruction of Drake Bridge to six lanes

Downtown E/W Arterial—study siting for major downtown aertial and traffic issues

First Street—Third Street—new arterial E/W pair; defeated in 1985 referendum

Barton Springs Road—reconstruction of intersection to Robert E. Lee; improvements to Barton Springs Road

Lamar Boulevard/Bridge—reconstruction to six lanes

Robert E. Lee Road—reconstruction to four lanes

CBD Street Improvements—street reconstruction

W. First Bridge at Shoal Creek—bank stabilization and channel work

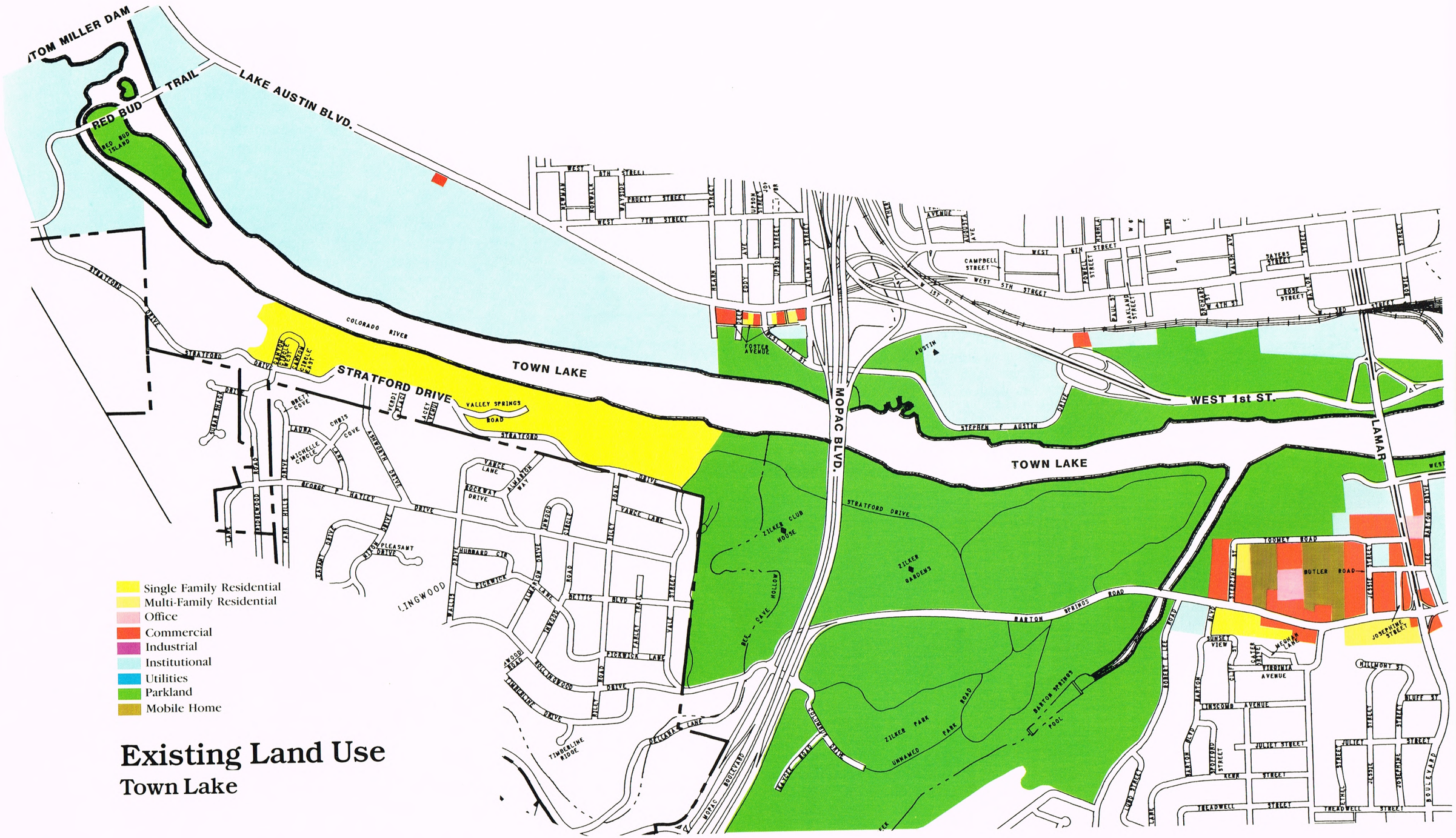
Source: *Urban Transportation Department*

Four principal roadways were recently designated scenic arterials in recognition of their relationship to the lake and adjacent parkland. These include Barton Springs Road, Riverside Drive, West First Street and Lake Austin Boulevard.

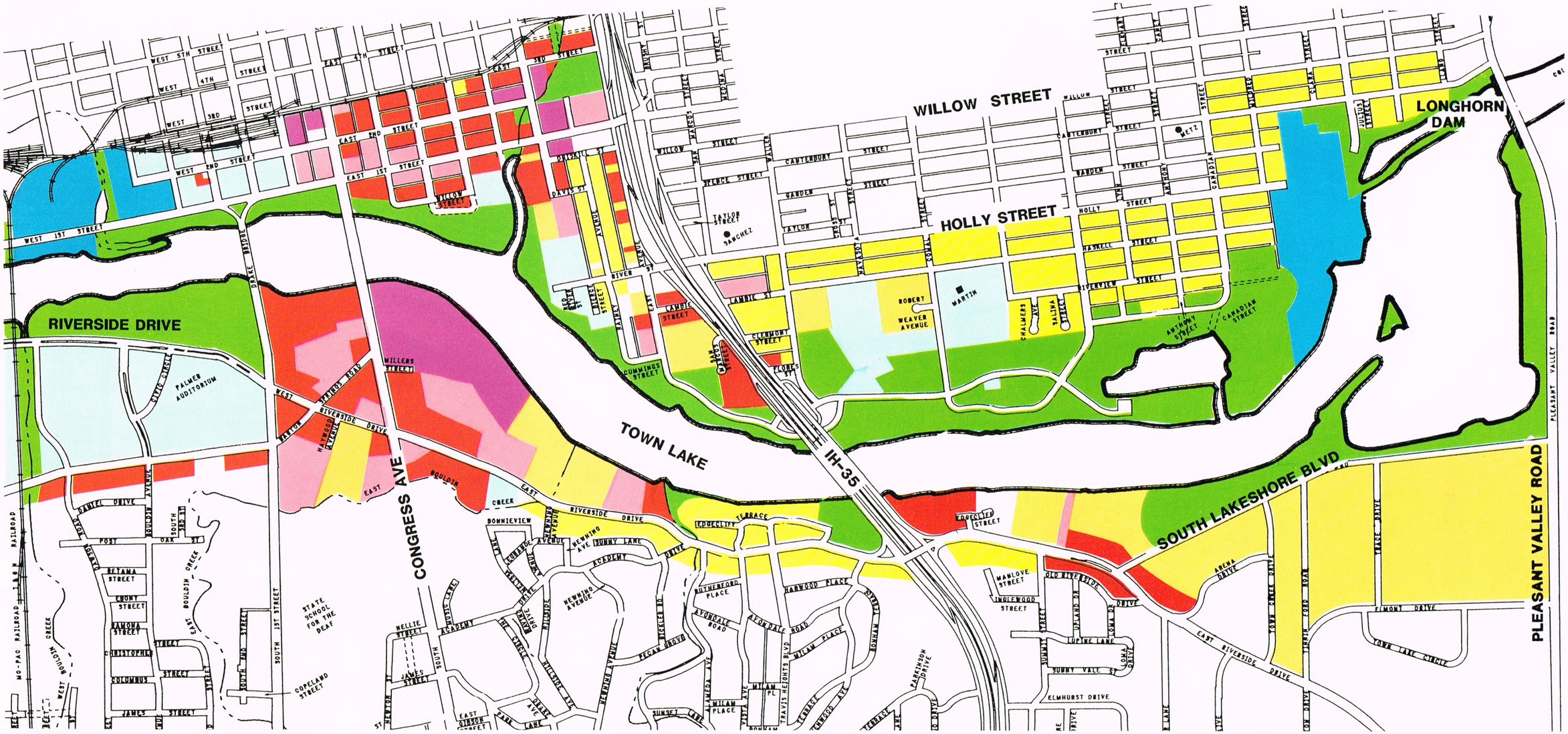
Presently vehicular access is predominantly linear along Town Lake. The lateral access, however, is not as well defined and legible even though there are 25 public parking lots, including areas underneath the MoPac and IH-35 bridges.

Inaccessible areas of Town Lake include the Balcones rock cliffs and the opposite shoreline, approximately one mile of shoreline on the south shore east of Congress Avenue, and the Holly Power Plant shoreline. Otherwise the 8.2 mile trail system provides excellent pedestrian and bicycle access; it was designated part of the National Trail System in 1975.

Pedestrian access and ramp connections are excellent at MoPac, fair at Congress Avenue and IH-35, unsafe and poor at the Lamar and First Street Bridges. No use is made of the water surface as a people mover and only one paddleboat provides regularly scheduled sightseeing tours. Bus service and a motorized trolley service for downtown provides a generally good transit system in the corridor.



Existing Land Use
Town Lake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LONGHORN DAM
RIVERSIDE DRIVE
TOWN LAKE
IH-35
CONGRESS AVE
SOUTH LAKESHORE BLVD
PLEASANT VALLEY ROAD
PALMER AUDITORIUM
STATE SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF
COPELAND STREET
WEST 1ST STREET
WEST 2ND STREET
WEST 3RD STREET
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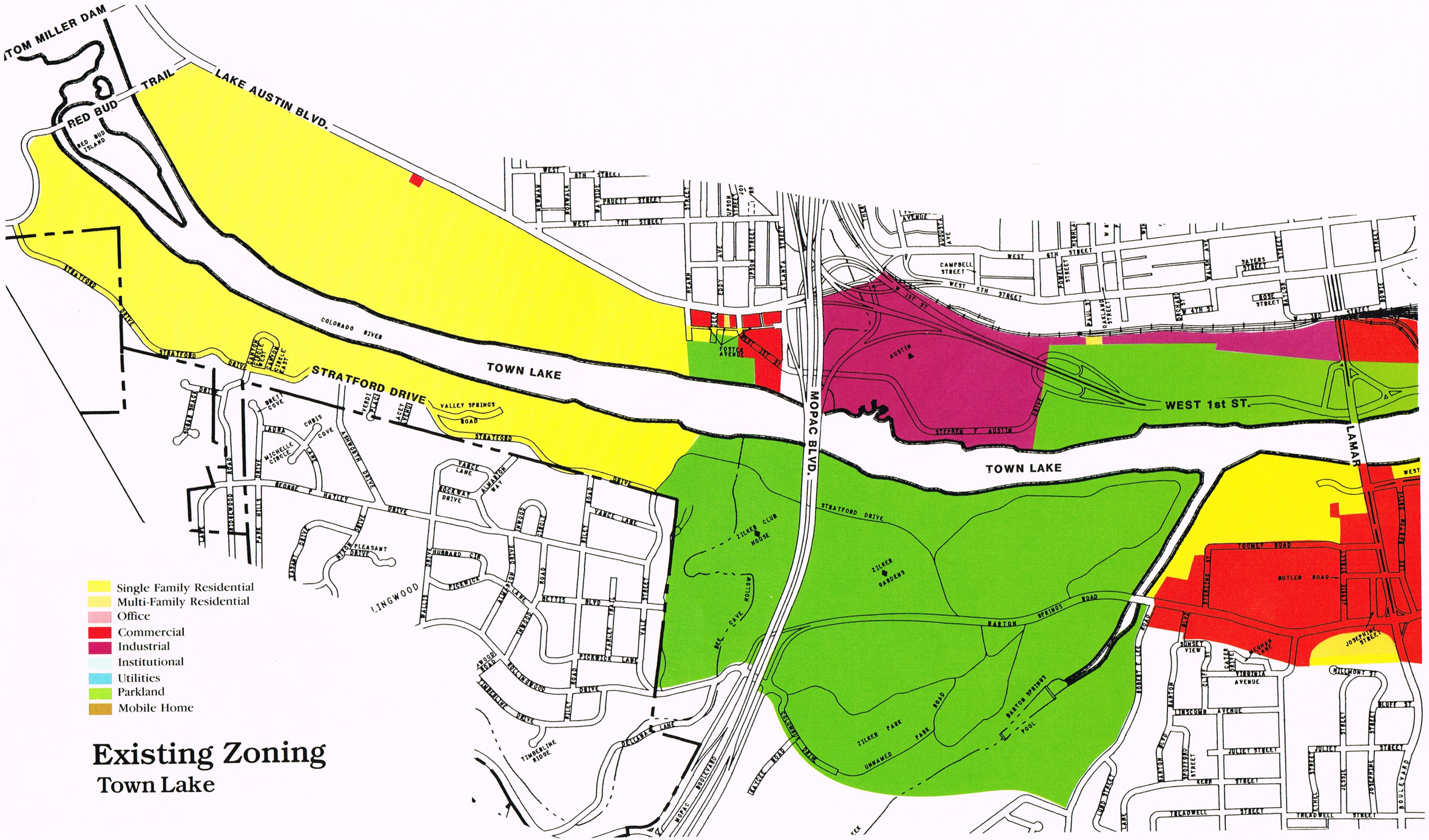
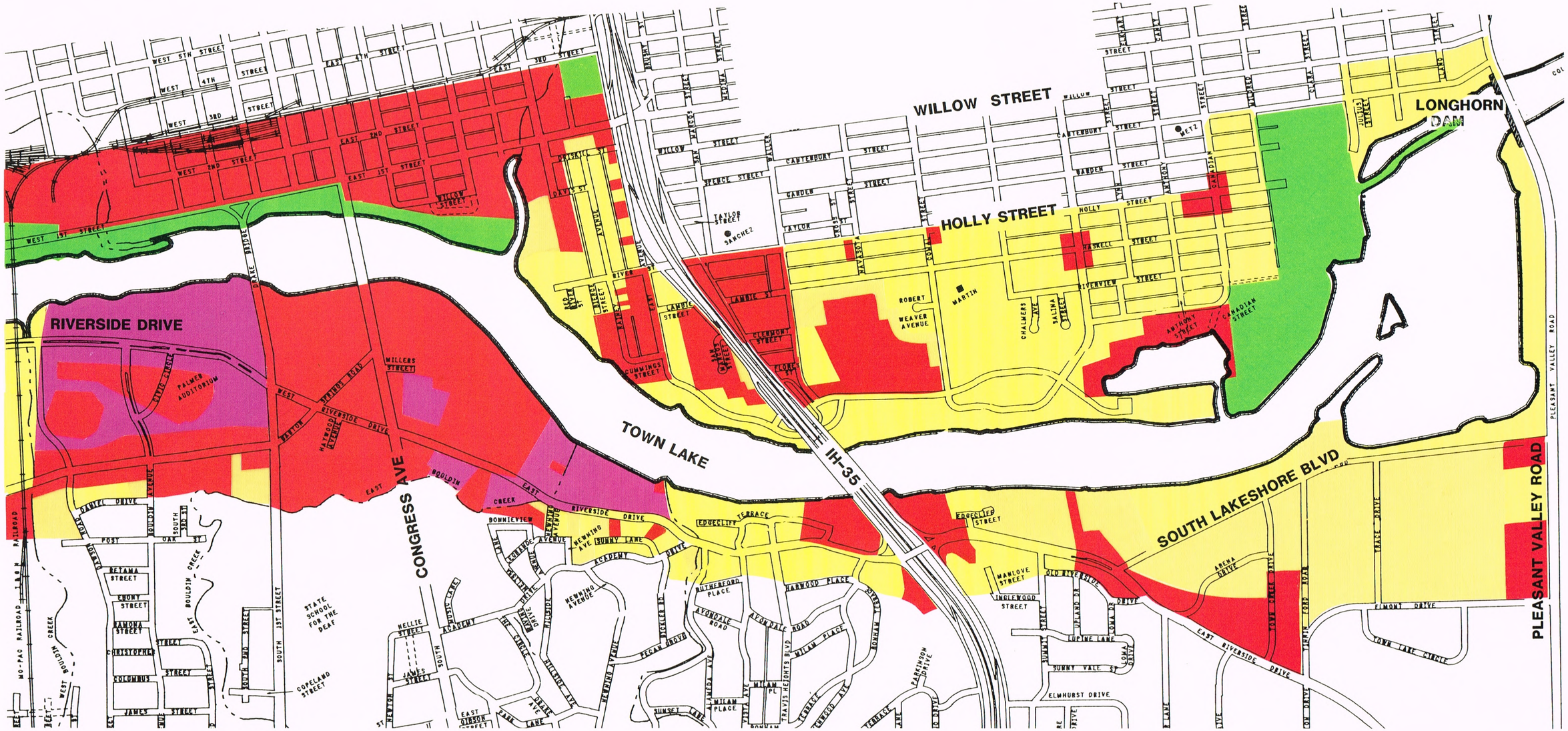
WILLOW STREET
DRISKILL ST
DAVIS ST
RIVER ST
LAMBIE STREET
CUMMINGS STREET
SAN MARCOS STREET
SPENCE STREET
CANTERBURY STREET
GARDEN STREET
TAYLOR STREET
SANCHEZ
ROBERT WEAVER AVENUE
MARTIN
CHALMERS AVE
SALINA STREET
HOLLY STREET
HASKELL STREET
RIVERVIEW STREET
ANTHONY STREET
CANADIAN STREET
METZ
WILLOW STREET
CANTERBURY STREET
GARDEN STREET
HOLLY STREET
EDGECLIFF STREET
EDGECLIFF TERRACE
MANLOVE STREET
INGLEWOOD STREET
OLD RIVERSIDE DRIVE
EAST RIVERSIDE DRIVE
ARENA DRIVE
ELMONT DRIVE
TOWN LAKE CIRCLE
ELMHURST DRIVE
PARKINSON DRIVE
HARWOOD PLACE
BUTHERFORD PLACE
AVONDALE ROAD
MILAM PLACE
TRAVIS HEIGHTS BLVD
PECAN GROVE
SUNSET LANE
NEWNING AVENUE
SUNNY LANE
ACADEMY DRIVE
BONNIEVIEW
EAST RIVERSIDE DRIVE
EAST BOULDIN CREEK
WEST BOULDIN CREEK
SOUTH 1ST STREET
SOUTH 2ND STREET
DRAKE BRIDGE
MILLERS STREET
WEST RIVERSIDE DRIVE
HAYWOOD AVENUE
DANIEL DRIVE
POST OAK ST
RETAMA STREET
EBONY STREET
RAMONA STREET
CHRISTOPHER STREET
COLUMBUS STREET
JAMES STREET
MO-PAC RAILROAD
I & G N RAILROAD
PLEASANT VALLEY ROAD



Existing Zoning
Town Lake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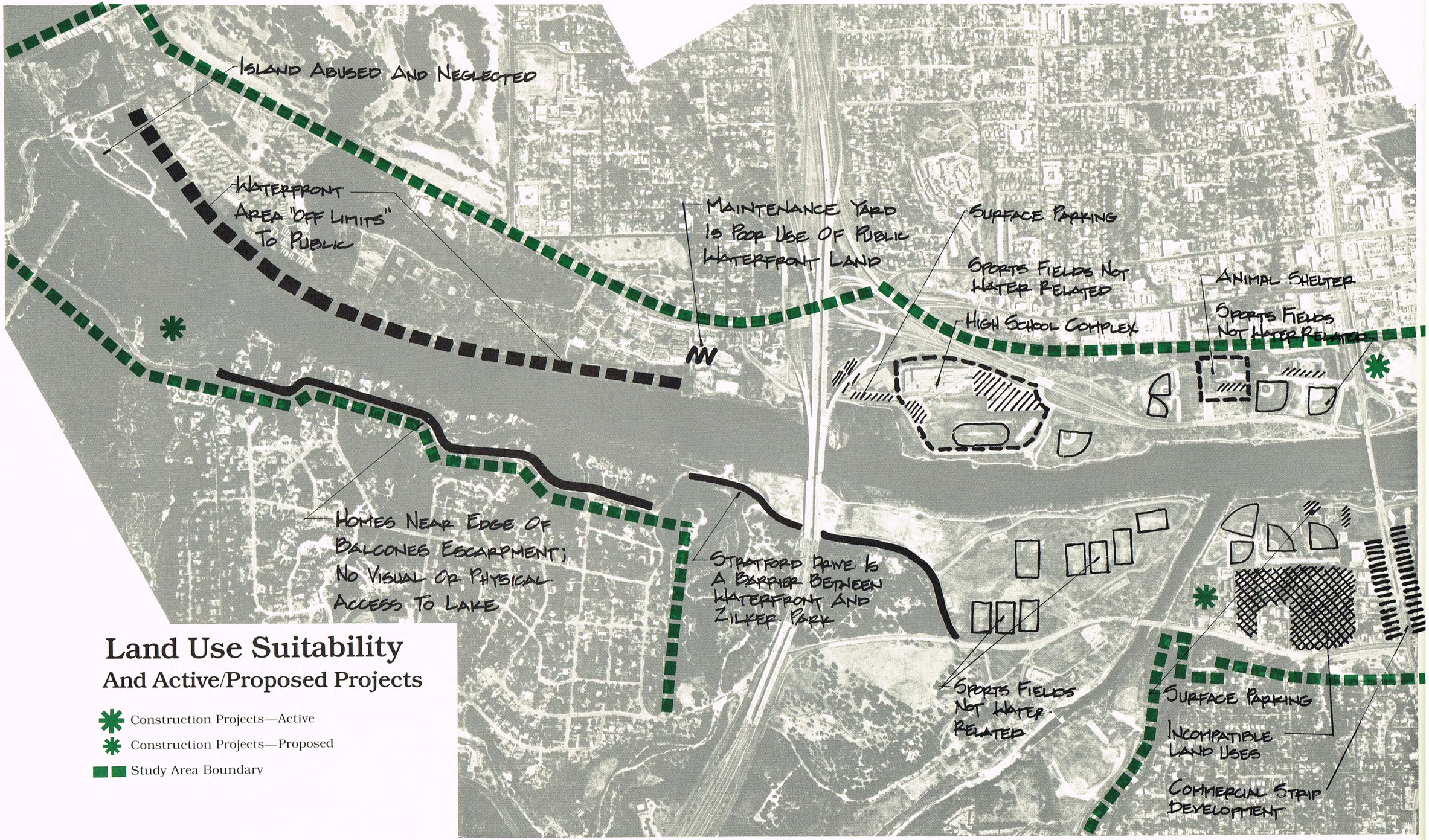
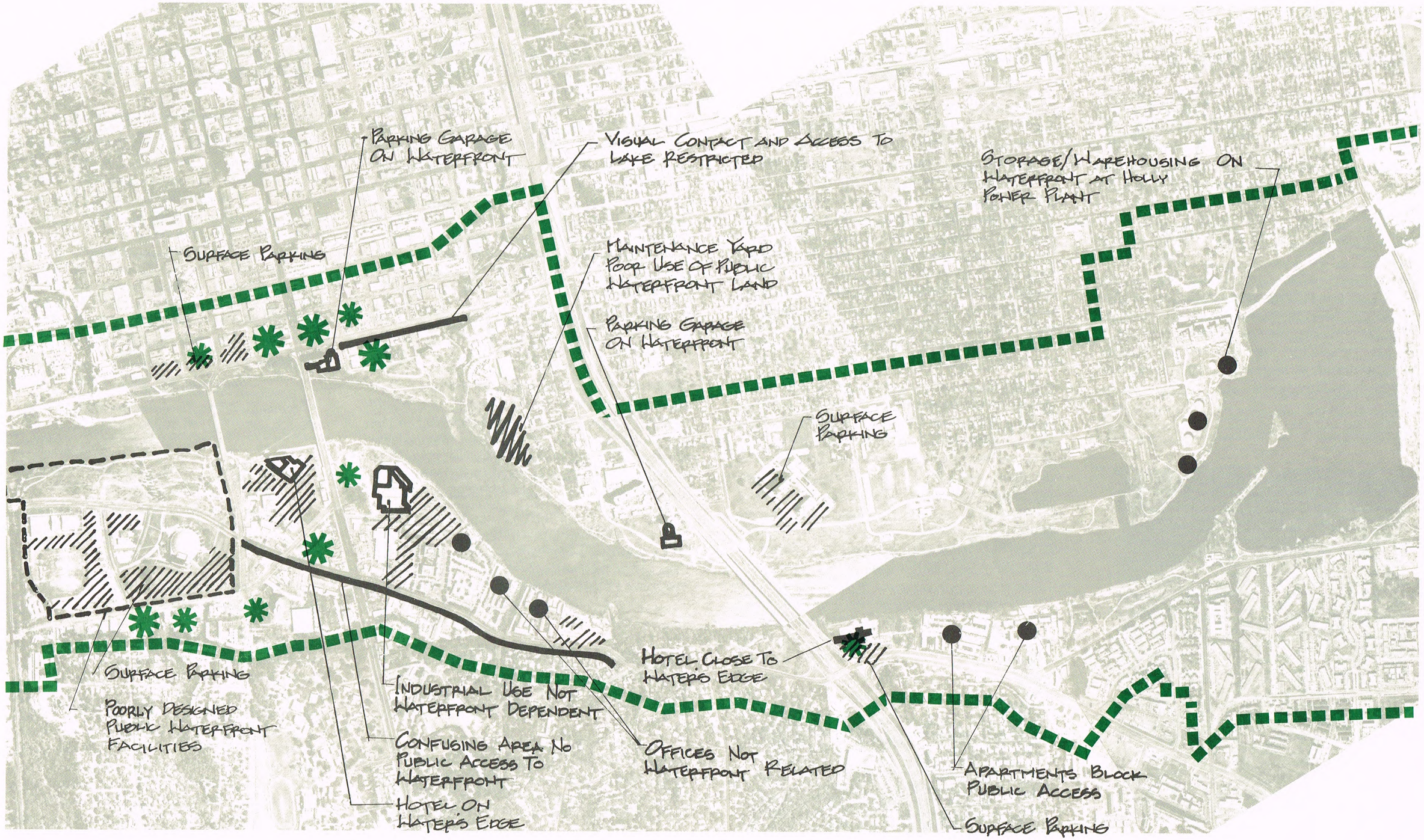


Land Use Suitability

And Active/Proposed Projects

- Construction Projects—Active
- Construction Projects—Proposed
- Study Area Boundary


Parking Garage On Waterfront
Visual Contact and Access to Lake Restricted
Storage/Warehousing On Waterfront at Holly Power Plant
Surface Parking
Maintenance Yard Poor Use of Public Waterfront Land
Parking Garage On Waterfront
Surface Parking
Hotel Close To Water's Edge
Industrial Use Not Waterfront Dependent
Surface Parking
Poorly Designed Public Waterfront Facilities
Confusing Area No Public Access To Waterfront
Offices Not Waterfront Related
Apartments Block Public Access
Hotel On Water's Edge
Surface Parking