



Austin Design Commission

Board/Commission Recommendation

20140922-004B

Recommendations from the Design Commission on
Seton Hospital's proposed elevated pedestrian walkway.
Approved by the Design Commission on a 6-0 vote.

September 22, 2014

Dear Council Members,

Below are recommendations from the Design Commission on Seton Hospital's proposed elevated pedestrian walkway.

The Design Commission tasked its Architecture and Development Working Group with evaluating the proposal submitted by the Seton Hospital Team. Having then met on two separate occasions over the last few weeks with members of the Seton Hospital team to discuss the urban design implications of the proposed sky-bridge upon the landscape and urban structure of the city, the working group presented its recommendations to the full membership of the Design Commission and its recommendation has been subsequently endorsed. The proposal was evaluated along with a number of additional options for crossing 15th Street that were presented to the working group by the Seton Hospital team. In addition, Chair Almy met with members of other stakeholder groups responsible for designing and managing associated projects that are to be located within the context of the larger innovation district in order to receive additional input about the larger urban design and landscape structure that is currently being designed and implemented. Contacts included members of the COA City Council, Jana McCann of McCann Adams Studio, Allan Shearer and Fritz Steiner working with the University of Texas and The Waller Creek Conservancy, and Larry Speck of Page.

1. The Proposal

The proposed bridge links an existing parking garage, currently located south of 15th Street and adjacent to the existing alignment of Red River Street, with the new hospital expansion, to be located on the north side and alongside the Waller Creek Corridor. Under this option, a new vertical core would be added to the garage in order to bring users down to a level that aligns with the main floor of the hospital expansion. The proposal works with the existing grade of 15th Street to achieve the required clearances.

2. Alternative Approaches

Alternative approaches presented by the Seton Hospital Group to the Design Commission (presented in backup) include options for: Option_A - using the existing core structure of the garage and a lengthy travel route to the hospital, Option_B - an underground tunnel located adjacent to the existing Red River alignment, Option_C - an at grade crossing along a realigned Red River Street (not fully vetted by Seton), and Option D - a proposed pedestrian bridge located along the western edge of the garage/hospital.

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Each of these propositions were listed along with their attendant positive and negative attributes raised by each in the submission from the Seton Hospital team.

3. Implications for the Larger Innovation District

- The Urban Design Guidelines adopted by the City of Austin and used as an evaluative tool by the Design Commission are quite explicit about restricting the construction of sky-bridges from the city's urban landscape.
- In reviewing the proposals, it has become clear that 15th Street is not adequately considered within the jurisdictional responsibilities of the various territories involved in planning the district. As such, its current planning status exists as a separator between jurisdictions (the UT Medical School Campus, the Waller Creek Conservancy, and Central Health).
- It is the opinion of the Design Commission that 15th Street and a re-aligned Red River Street have the potential to become an important part of the public space infrastructure that has the potential to bind all these participating districts into a unified whole.
- It is therefore recommended that a variation of the City of Austin's Great Streets standards be applied to these two streets. On 15th Street, this would have the added advantage of linking into any planning initiatives that might occur within the state capital complex and the city's proposed urban rail alignment.
- The University of Texas at Austin and Central Health should be encouraged to adopt a realigned Red River Street (articulated as a great street) as the central armature for future development plans.
- The development of the Waller Creek Corridor requires the implementation of pedestrian friendly connections across 15th Street, a situation that could require the reconstruction of the 15th Street Bridge. This would be a further incentive to develop 15th Street according to Great Street standards.

4. Recommendations from the Working Group

- The Design Commission does not endorse the proposed pedestrian sky-bridge (Option D) but does recognize the difficult issues involved with the planning and coordination of the district along with the attendant questions of safety and accessibility that impact the functioning of the Seton Hospital Complex.
- The Design Commission would prefer that solutions be found for at grade crossings (Option C) in order to maintain the integrity of the urban grid and to keep sightlines to the capital complex and the Waller Creek Corridor clear.
- In retrospect, it seems far more important to recognize the status of 15th Street and the re-aligned Red River Street as important armatures for binding the new districts within the Innovation District together. We encourage any and all efforts (public and private) to develop a comprehensive approach to these roadways in order to achieve a sense of place that transcends individual development initiatives and serves to bind all of the future projects together into a vital and humane part of Austin's future.

On Behalf of the Design Commission,



Dean J. Almy III, AIA, FFUD
Chair, City of Austin Design Commission