

Urban Trails Master Plan

FAQ's

For more information about the Urban Trails Master Plan, please visit the www.austintexas.gov/yourpath.

Q: Why does Austin need a comprehensive Urban Trails Master Plan?

Required by City Council resolution No. 20080424-064 and specified in the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan (CFS, A9), the major deliverables of the Urban Trails Master Plan are to:

- consolidate existing trail-related plans and policies,
- provide consistency and connectivity to a citywide trail network,
- encourage developers to connect to or complete the trail system, and
- use protected land along creeks and floodplains in an environmentally sustainable way.

Q: I'm concerned about the impact on the environment. Does the Urban Trails Master Plan adequately address environmental issues?

Expanding choices for safe, affordable and sustainable travel modes has a positive impact on our environment. By making transit, biking, and walking realistic options, we encourage families and people of all ages to reduce motor vehicle trips, or eliminate a family's need to own two cars. Reduction in motor vehicle trips positively impacts our air and water quality, as well as our quality of life. A recent survey of Austin citizens showed that 80% of them were more likely to ride bicycles more often if more separated paths or trails were available.

All current environmental protections in the City Code will be applied to the construction and design of Urban Trails. The Urban Trails Program recognizes that many proposed Urban Trails may be located in greenfield development areas. Therefore, significant care has been taken to promote the utmost sensitivity for environmental concerns. If environmental concerns are not met to the satisfaction of City of Austin staff, the community, or appropriate boards and commissions, a "no build" option will be considered.

Water:

The City of Austin provides superior protection for our water resources and retains stricter environmental regulations for water protection than Federal or State requirements. The Urban Trail Master Plan will go beyond these requirements. If an Urban Trail must be located closer to the waterway than allowed by section 25-8-261 of the Land Development Code, which identifies Critical Water Quality Zones (CWQZ), all appropriate City of Austin Boards and Commissions will be briefed prior to finalizing the design of such a trail.

Beyond protecting the CWQZ, the City of Austin also has strict requirements regarding floodplains and floodplain management. No Urban Trail will be built if it negatively impacts the floodplain. Permeable trail surfaces will be applied when feasible.

Wildlife Habitat and Trees:

The Urban Trails Program recognizes the importance trees play not only in retaining and protecting natural habitats for wildlife, but also accommodating active transportation (it's hot out there – think shade). Existing shade trees will be protected and any construction near trees will meet all City-approved best management practices. Additionally, per the recommendation of the Urban Forestry Board (UFB), during construction of Urban Trails, special care will be made to water trees within 5-10 feet from the trail edge, trails will be designed to maintain natural drainage for trees and will incorporate green infrastructure as possible to distribute and direct sheet flows, manage stormwater, and contribute to sustainable vegetative maintenance. Per the UFB the UTMP will adhere to the Heritage and Protected Tree ordinances, will meet the standards provided by the Environmental Criteria Manual, the Austin Urban Forest Plan, and will count on interdepartmental coordination and partnership with local environmental groups for the design and construction of sustainable, shady trails.

Every Urban Trail will be designed to mitigate any impact on critical environmental features and endangered species. All artificial nighttime lighting along Urban Trails shall be Dark Sky compliant¹. Before design begins, potential trail routes

¹ Dark Sky compliance seeks to preserve the night sky by using outdoor lighting only when necessary, shielding or recessing bulbs, aiming fixtures downward, and using low wattage bulbs. From "What is Light Pollution?" <http://www.texasida.org>, (8/13/14).

will be analyzed for their feasibility. During this phase, an independent, certified wildlife biologist or ecologist will be part of the team and will analyze every trail option for its impact on wildlife in the area.

Q: What if I don't like the location of the proposed urban trail alignment on the map?

The Plan includes a conceptual map of trail opportunities that connect people to places. It does not include every potential connection, nor will every trail on the map be constructed. Each potential Urban Trail is prioritized based on proximity to attractions/destinations, the connectivity it would provide, whether or not it is included in an existing plan or policy, and the population density within a ½ mile of the trail.

Tier 1 trails, or those with the highest priority that will have the greatest impact on our community, will undergo a preliminary engineering review (PER) prior to design or construction. A PER incorporates geotechnical, environmental, cultural, and wildlife information and will provide alternative alignments for the trail given existing City Code, standards, and policies. Public input will be sought during the PER process regarding the alternatives available given the opportunities and constraints. This input will be included in the final draft of the PER and may impact which alignment is ultimately chosen.

Q: What happens after the PER?

1. The trail undergoes multiple phases of design; each phase is reviewed by multiple City of Austin departments.
2. If the trail crosses into other jurisdictions or along private property, agreements and negotiations may occur.
3. Once the above takes place, the project will go to bid for construction.
4. Watershed Protection, Parks and Recreation, and Public Works Departments may sign an Interdepartmental Agreement to clarify maintenance and operations of the trail. The Watershed Protection Department oversees protection of creeks, the Parks Department oversees the park system, and the Public Works Department oversees the construction and maintenance of the surface, bridges, shoulders, and trees along Urban Trails.

Q: What does an Urban Trail Look Like?

An Urban Trail is a hard surface, all-weather path for active transportation and recreation uses. Urban Trails are designed to accommodate users of all ages and abilities. In general, the standard width of an Urban Trail is 12' and the standard surface will be asphalt or concrete. A 12' wide hard surface trail accommodates two-way bicyclists and pedestrians. However, Urban Trail width will vary dependent upon the context of the trail, projected trail usage, and surrounding environmental opportunities and constraints. Permeable trail surfaces will be applied when feasible.

Q: What will an Urban Trail do to my property value?

A comprehensive literature review of trails and their impact on property value, nationally and internationally, show no negative impacts. Studies as far back as 1978 have demonstrated that trails either increase or retain property value. More recently, a 2011 study by Rainer vom Hofe and Olivier Parent demonstrated that, "investment in infrastructure and public amenities [such as trails] is a solid investment that will result in a positive return for communities." These positive benefits are more than quantifiable economically, as they are desirable by home owners who are willing to pay a premium for convenient access to healthy, active transportation options.

Q: Will an Urban Trail bring crime to my neighborhood?

Studies show that crime rates are lower on trails than in other adjacent environments. It is 97% more likely that a crime will occur on the street or in a home than on a trail (Tracy, 1998). Additionally, studies show that once trails are built, occurrences of homelessness at sites was reduced (Eakin, 2001). There is no proven correlation between crime and trails. In fact, trails are often safer places than streets, parking lots, and shopping malls.

Although the evidence is clear that Urban Trails do not cause an increase in crime, any negligible increase in minor offenses such as littering, illegal motor use, noise, and unleashed pets, will be effectively mitigated through regular maintenance and enforcement of Urban Trail regulations.