



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Richard Mendoza, P.E., Interim Director 
Austin Transportation Department

DATE: July 26, 2022

SUBJECT: Staff Update on Resolution No. 20220421-059: Efforts to Improve Healthy Food Access via Public Transportation

This memorandum serves as an update to Resolution No. 20220421-059, which directed the City Manager to work with various stakeholders, including Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (CapMetro), to improve public transportation access to healthy food.

A multi-departmental City of Austin (COA) team consisting of staff from the Austin Transportation Department, Austin Public Health, and Office of Sustainability, is working to address the directives set forth in the Resolution and is completing this work in partnership with both CapMetro and Austin Transit Partnership (ATP) staff. Since Council adopted the Resolution on April 22, 2022, the COA team has met several times to plan a response approach. As part of that process, staff convened a meeting with CapMetro and ATP representatives on June 23, 2022, to discuss current actions and potential future strategies to address healthy food access barriers. Information shared by CapMetro and ATP during that meeting include the following highlights:

Review of actions taken:

- CapMetro provided a history of previous initiatives oriented around transit access to healthy food, including grant-funded bus routes connecting East Austin communities to the HEB grocery stores located on East 7th Street at North Pleasant Valley Road and on East Riverside Drive at South Pleasant Valley Road, as well as the Fiesta Grocery store on East 38th ½ Street. Since their inception, those grant-funded routes have been absorbed into CapMetro's regular bus route network;
- CapMetro's MetroAccess paratransit service provides mobility for individuals with disabilities, many of whom face challenges accessing healthy food;
- CapMetro transferred a vehicle to EquidadATX this year, which will be converted into a mobile grocery store to be operated by the Central Texas Food Bank.

Potential future strategies and considerations:

- ATP is considering how to incorporate public space into future light rail stations, including the potential for co-locating food assets in those public spaces;

- CapMetro is building a large facility in East Austin (located in Travis County) at Springdale Road and Cameron Road; they are dedicated to incorporating community space into that facility, including a potential farmers market or food kitchen, and will engage the community on their preferred use of that space in Fall 2022. CapMetro anticipates the facility will be constructed by the end of 2024;
- Recognition by all agency stakeholders that the responsibility for improving transit access to healthy food must be shared by multiple entities; for example, CapMetro routes can connect neighborhoods to healthy food retailers, but if there is no safe and accessible first/last mile connection (sidewalk, bike facility, safe crossing, etc.) between the bus stop and customers' origin/destination, there will still be barriers to accessing healthy food. CapMetro origin and destination data could be leveraged by City planning efforts to improve first/last mile connections to health food;
- Recognition by all agency stakeholders that long range planning is crucial; CapMetro will participate in a five-year comprehensive food system planning process being led by the Office of Sustainability.

As a result of this initial work and coordination with CapMetro and ATP, the COA team provides the following updates to Resolution No. 20220421-059:

Directive 1: Send a letter to CapMetro encouraging the placement of grocery store locations on transit maps and on transit route pamphlets or any relevant informational maps, including apps and websites, for the benefit of residents who are users of the public transportation operated by CapMetro, including the changes detailed in this Resolution. Explore opportunities to add a “grocery store finder”, enrollment options for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, to include a map of all Austin area schools that provide free and reduced meal programs, and locations of food pantries and farmers markets with Double-Up Food Bucks to the CapMetro app.

- **Response:** In lieu of sending a letter, the COA team will commit to regular meetings with CapMetro and ATP staff to develop short, medium, and long-term strategies for improving access to healthy food including, but not limited to, the strategies listed above. The COA team commits to providing Council with a summary of those meetings and proposed next steps by September 30, 2022.

Directive 2: Initiate an amendment to Action Item 175 (Access to food and markets, including grocery stores) in the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan to work with CapMetro to provide additional bus routes and increase the frequency of routes that connect food deserts to healthy food options in Austin.

- **Response:** The proposed Amendment to Action Item 175 of the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan was adopted by Council on June 9, 2022. In addition to completing this amendment process, Austin Transportation Department staff commit to leading an inter-departmental effort to develop a network analysis of transportation options for communities with limited access to healthy food retail. This analysis will be provided to CapMetro for potential integration into future public transit route analysis and design.

Directive 3: Initiate an amendment to Action Item 175 (Access to food and markets, including grocery stores) in the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan to work with CapMetro to provide audible and visual announcements of healthy food options for onboard passengers when buses stop at or near grocery store locations.

- **Response:** The proposed Amendment to Action Item 175 of the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan was adopted by Council on June 9, 2022. In addition to completing this amendment process, as part of the Office of Sustainability’s Food Planning Effort the COA team commits to coordinating with CapMetro and the community to assess the feasibility and utility of providing audible and visual announcements of healthy food options for onboard passengers when buses stop at or near grocery store locations.

Directive 4: Provide a study assessing how to better connect low-access communities directly to grocery stores. The results of this study and any information about food deserts or food-access resources should be provided frequently to CapMetro, the Austin Transportation and Public Works Departments, and other transportation providers for consideration in their service and infrastructure planning processes.

- **Response:** Austin Transportation Department staff commit to leading an inter-departmental effort to develop a network analysis of transportation options for communities with limited access to healthy food retail. This analysis will be provided to CapMetro for potential integration into future public transit route analysis and design and made available to Public Works and other transportation providers for consideration during service and infrastructure planning processes. Additionally, the Office of Sustainability will integrate this network analysis into their Food Planning process, launching in the fall of 2022. This will include opportunities throughout the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023 to ‘socialize’ the network analysis with communities through focus groups, surveys, and public events. Based on public input, The Office of Sustainability, working in collaboration with the Food Planning consultants and project team which includes a Community Advisory Committee, will develop recommendations in the fall of 2023 to be integrated into the final Food Plan.

The COA team will continue to make progress on the above items in coordination with our partners at CapMetro and ATP and will provide Council with an update on the progress. If you have any questions, please contact Caitlin D’Alton with Austin Transportation at Caitlin.D’Alton@austintexas.gov or 512-974-6506.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Anne Morgan, Acting City Manager
Gina Fiandaca, Assistant City Manager
Stephanie Hayden-Howard, Assistant City Manager
Jason Alexander, Chief of Staff