



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Mayor and Council Members

**FROM:** Gina Fiandaca, Assistant City Manager *Gina Fiandaca*

**DATE:** August 19, 2020

**SUBJECT:** **IH-35 Improvements: Cap and Stitch Project**

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The purpose of this memorandum is to inform Council about city staff's work in conjunction with the Downtown Austin Alliance (Downtown Alliance) on a project that seeks to create developable space and multi-modal connectivity over certain areas of planned IH-35 improvements in downtown and central Austin.

### **Background**

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is planning to reconstruct IH-35 through Central Austin as part of the [IH-35 Capital Express Central Project](#) with TxDOT's overall goals to improve safety and mobility along the corridor.

Through a series of charrettes and regular meetings with TxDOT, City of Austin has been able to form a beneficial collaboration to ensure the following City's primary goals were recognized and considered for future iterations of the design process:

- Safety – reduce documented serious injuries and fatalities through best-practice design
- Mode shift – facilitate the [Austin Strategic Mobility Plan's](#) adopted goal of reducing to 50% drive-alone trips by 2039
- Access – improve loading and unloading to the regional employment center (downtown Austin, Capitol Complex, and University District) via a circulator street system
- Transit – provide access to the city core via managed facilities on both ends of downtown
- Bicycles & Pedestrians – incorporate improved direct connections to the City's Boardwalk
- Connectivity – improve multi-modal connections and developable space across IH-35

Preliminary concepts envision removing the upper decks and lowering the highway between Airport Blvd. and Cesar Chavez Street, subject to design constraints being evaluated with city staff and other partners. This concept allows the possibility of creating a structural cover, or lid, over the highway right-of-way that could support green space, a park, crossing streets, and/or buildings ("cap") as well as enhanced multi-modal connectivity across IH-35 ("stitch") to facilitate the connectivity goal previously listed. TxDOT anticipates beginning construction in 2025, with the initial scoping process for the federally-required environmental clearance phase is anticipated to start in 2021.

Further development of the “cap and stitch” concepts for sections of IH-35 in central Austin will require local participation in coordination with the TxDOT project team to determine the best approaches for integrating this project with the current IH-35 Capital Express Central Project.

To seize on this opportunity, the Downtown Alliance engaged the Urban Land Institute’s (ULI) national advisory services in late 2019 to help develop a road map for a community-based vision for the IH-35 corridor.

The Downtown Alliance convened multiple groups of community leaders and stakeholders to participate in the ULI initiative. The Downtown Alliance also developed a briefing book that served ULI panelists as a reference guide and high-level overview of the opportunities and challenges facing the future of the IH-35 corridor. They convened tours of the corridor led by community guides and arranged ULI panelist interviews with a variety of stakeholders in the community, including many Austin City Council Members and staff from a variety of City of Austin departments.

The panel presented preliminary recommendations for the future of IH-35 at Huston-Tillotson University on February 28. These initial recommendations are explained in further detail in the report, which was delivered to the Downtown Alliance in April 2020. The Downtown Alliance along with the ULI consultant team also provided a briefing of the report and its recommendations to city staff. The ULI report is attached.

### **IH-35 Cap and Stitch Project Partnership**

After receiving an overview of the report from the Downtown Alliance and ULI project team, the City Manager’s Office appointed Mike Trimble, Director of the Corridor Program Office, to lead IH-35 Cap and Stitch Project coordination and development in collaboration with the Austin Transportation Department.

City of Austin and Downtown Alliance staff formed an initial project team to further analyze report recommendations for the IH-35 Cap and Stitch Project and to determine feasible next steps that would continue to involve key stakeholders and community representatives. These steps will include further development of community priorities for this project as well as development of technical concepts for the cap and stitch components that could be incorporated into the larger IH-35 mobility improvement project.

The Downtown Alliance is currently planning a virtual engagement effort to help shape how the next phase of this work is approached. In particular, these interim efforts aim to address the recommendation for co-creating the project vision, establishing the community’s decision-making process, and for centering equity in the project’s foundation as addressed in the ULI report. They will also launch a community engagement site for ongoing input, conversations and transparency. Council Members, their constituents and staff are invited to participate in these conversations and virtual events and help shape how we collectively move forward.

In addition, city staff on the project team are reaching out to additional City departments to ensure that dimensions beyond mobility are being considered from the outset including equity, affordability, economic development impacts, and sustainability considerations.

As we continue to formulate a path forward and next steps, we are also working towards a more formal interlocal agreement between the City, Downtown Alliance and including community stakeholders that we anticipate bringing to Council for consideration in the near future.

Please feel free to contact me or Mike Trimble if you have any questions or would like additional information.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager  
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