



MEMORANDUM

TO: City of Austin Mayor and Council Members, Austin Transit Partnership Board Chair and Board Members, Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority Board Chair and Board Members

FROM: Awais Azhar, Chair, Project Connect Community Advisory Committee

CC: Greg Canally, Executive Director, Austin Transit Partnership
Dottie Watkins, President and CEO, Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority
Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager, City of Austin
Robert Goode, Interim Assistant City Manager, City of Austin

DATE: May 11, 2023

SUBJECT: Project Connect Community Advisory Committee Austin Light Rail Implementation Recommendations

As the City of Austin, Austin Transit Partnership, and Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority move towards implementation of the first phase of the Austin Light Rail component of Project Connect, **the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) recommends one of two light rail implementation options presented to the community and decision makers: On-Street: 38th to Oltorf to Yellow Jacket and On-Street: North Lamar to Pleasant Valley.** The CAC makes this recommendation based on community feedback, conversations with stakeholders and staff, data analysis, and alignment with System-Wide Design Principles that the CAC created in advance of the options being released. Either one of these options would expand transit services for our community and provide certain opportunities, while faced by some challenges, as described below.

Commitment to Overall Austin Light Rail Vision and On-Street Service

The Project Connect program advances transit connectivity throughout our entire community by expanding MetroRail and MetroRapid Services, creating Austin's first Light Rail system, and improving other transit service and infrastructure. The CAC fully supports the overall Austin Light Rail vision and asks that the leadership of all three parties explore innovative solutions to achieve full implementation of subsequent phases of the vision. The first phase of Austin Light Rail will play a critical role in expanding transit service in Austin. It is also important to plan for future expansions of the system, while

continuing the ongoing work to expand MetroRapid services in our community. It is necessary to ensure the Project Connect program proceeds with a focus on equitably expanding our transit system in a manner that supports the needs of existing riders and provides opportunities to expand ridership.

The CAC recommends the two on-street options for Austin Light Rail because of the greater number of riders served by these options and we believe on-street transit infrastructure will better serve our community at this time by providing seamless connections with other transit modes and active transportation elements, enhancing accessibility to minimize impacts for people with disabilities while also benefiting other users such as those with strollers, and activating the street-level through a better interface between the transit system and the urban sphere.

Opportunities and Challenges of Recommended Options

Both options recommended by the CAC provide certain opportunities, while facing specific challenges. The two recommended options provide the greatest coverage in terms of number of stations and overall system length out of the five options, have higher ridership figures, and provide greater interaction with other mobility modes. The recommended options overall serve a similar number of people and people living in poverty and provide access to a similar number of affordable housing units and low-wage jobs¹. Furthermore, both of these options provide greater accessibility for people with disabilities and other users such as those utilizing a stroller. However, these options also require significant utility relocations and mitigation of other factors.

From the perspective of equitably expanding transit services, the 38th to Oltorf to Yellow Jacket option serves more Black, Indigenous, and people of color. This option also provides a starter segment on all three legs of the full Austin Light Rail vision plan, allowing for rapid expansion in the future. Furthermore, this option provides better transit services to South Congress (SoCo), giving Austinites alternatives to congested roads and associated parking issues in the SoCo commercial area. At the same time, out of the two recommended options, this option does not serve the most riders or provide access to the most jobs. In addition, while this option allows rail service to be extended to the communities east of Pleasant Valley, locating the maintenance facility in East Austin will necessitate mitigation of any potential impacts and engaging with the neighboring community throughout the design process to address the concerns they have voiced. If, during further planning for this option, the opportunity should arise to build only one of the two proposed flex segments in the first phase of the light rail implementation, the CAC recommends that priority is given to segments that serve the most riders.

The North Lamar to Pleasant Valley option serves the most riders and connects the service to the greatest number of jobs. It provides a critical connection to the North Lamar Transit Center, enhancing connectivity with North Austin and offering opportunities for creating Equitable Transit Oriented Development (ETOD) at that publicly owned site. It also provides a connection with the Red Line MetroRail at the Crestview station. Furthermore, with enhanced design elements, similar to what is recommended below, this option could provide opportunities for seamless future expansion of the light rail system. However, this option includes elements such as construction in the public right-of-way and

¹ The data analysis for this section is supported by work completed by Austin Transit Partnership Staff and Dr. Alex Karner, Ex-Officio member of the CAC.

conflicts between the Red Line and light rail that need to be resolved and addressed in the future. In addition, while this option allows rail service to be extended to the communities North of US Highway 183, locating the maintenance facility at the proposed location necessitates further engagement with the neighboring community in the future. Should the North Lamar to Pleasant Valley option be selected, the CAC recommends that tie-in infrastructure, including track switch, be included in the initial phase of development to allow for expandability of the light rail system with minimal disruption to future light rail operations.

Regardless of the option selected for light rail in Austin, it is necessary to address any potential impacts of the maintenance facility on the surrounding communities and to engage with stakeholders in those communities during the design process. Furthermore, the selected light rail option must be aligned with the existing bus and active transportation networks to provide seamless connections for riders. It is also important to ensure that land-use policies, affordable housing opportunities, and anti-displacement efforts support the initial light rail infrastructure to ensure that the greatest number of Austinites can access and benefit from the system equitably.

Maintenance Facility Recommendations

To ensure that any future maintenance facility created as a part of Austin Light Rail does not have a potential disparate impact on the surrounding community, we ask that the following be considered.

- As design advances, including during parts of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review process, ensure that there is continued engagement with the community through transparent processes that embody the following principles:
 - Ensure that environmental review documentation is shared with the public in a transparent and timely fashion.
 - Ensure that public engagement efforts are aligned with the Community Engagement and Inclusion Commitments included in the Joint Powers Agreement.
 - Ensure that the environmental review considers impacts from an environmental justice perspective.
 - As appropriate, include the CAC in future design discussions, including the NEPA review process.
- Depending on findings from the NEPA review process, ensure that there is ongoing environmental evaluation and transparency by undertaking the following:
 - If warranted by the Environmental Impact Statement, commit to periodically monitor any potential air quality and noise impacts throughout the lifetime of the project.
 - If monitoring is necessary, ensure data is shared periodically with the Community Advisory Committee in a meeting open to the public.
 - If monitoring is necessary, share data on an easily accessible webpage for the public to review.
- Ensure that the design of the facility supports community needs and is environmentally sustainable using the following approaches:

- Engage with the surrounding community and the Community Advisory Committee in the design of the facility.
 - Minimize impacts on any adjacent residential uses, including any site utilized for providing shelter to unhoused neighbors.
 - If there is to be any fuel storage, ensure that there is no underground fuel storage.
 - Ensure that there is proper on-site stormwater mitigation.
 - If possible, allow direct pedestrian access to the facility from the surrounding neighborhood, to allow workers and community members to access the site easily.
 - If a sound wall or other solid barrier is built, consider working with the community on a public arts project similar to that for the former Holly Power Plant.
 - Utilize green building techniques and advanced environmental standards.
 - Preserve or relocate as many heritage trees on the site as possible.
- Ensure that there is proper noise and light mitigation, where necessary, using the following approaches:
 - Utilize a landscape buffer and setbacks from residential uses.
 - Where necessary, create a sound wall or other solid barrier.
 - Utilize shielded and directional light fixtures.
 - If necessary, provide adjoining residential property owners the opportunity to soundproof openings in the direction of the facility, this includes both owner and renter-occupied properties.
 - Ensure that there is minimized idling of non-light rail vehicles on the site.
- Provide the surrounding community with benefits that serve their needs, including, but not limited to, the following:
 - Explore the potential for education and workforce partnerships with local school districts and community college to create work opportunities for local residents during the construction and operation phases.
 - Within the constraints of federal guidelines, create internal and external spaces that are accessible to the community for hosting meetings, holding community gatherings, and other activities.
 - Explore the ability to provide walking paths on the periphery of the facility.
 - Proactively work to ensure the participation of Disadvantaged Business Enterprises in the project, with an aim to support business of all types.
 - Explore opportunities to incorporate public art programs, such as those at the former Holly Power Plant site.
 - Ensure that all community spaces provided on the site, or surrounding it, are accessible for people with disabilities and other users.

Austin Light Rail will increase connectivity and accessibility in our community by providing an enhanced transit experience. The CAC sees great opportunities for the Austin community with both the 38th to Oltorf to Yellow Jacket and North Lamar to Pleasant Valley options. The CAC wishes to thank the Austin Transit Partnership for their commendable community engagement efforts, supporting the CAC through

this decision-making process, and providing us with all necessary information to make these recommendations.

If you should have any questions, I can be reached at bc-awais.azhar@austintexas.gov.

Date of Approval: May 11, 2023

Record of the vote: Approved on a 11-0-0 vote (Committee Member Elias absent; one vacancy)

Attest:  , Project Connect Community Advisory Committee Chair