

**PRESS RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 15, 2018

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## **Proposal to Bury I-35 Through Austin Wins Local Award**

Reconnect Austin Recognized with ULI Next Big Idea Award

AUSTIN, Texas — The grassroots proposal to bury I-35 through Austin’s urban core and create a pedestrian-friendly boulevard recently received a boost at the [Urban Land Institute \(ULI\) Austin’s 2018 Impact Awards](#).

The land-use advocacy group selected the proposal – known as [Reconnect Austin](#) – and its pioneers at the local urban design firm [Black + Vernooy](#) as the recipients of the 2018 Next Big Idea award. The new award recognizes “an upcoming project, master planning effort, redevelopment, program, policy or ‘idea’ that will transform our industry and our community.”

“It’s not just an infrastructure or transportation project,” said Ivy R. Taylor, former San Antonio mayor and 2018 Impact Awards judge. “This is a tremendous chance to re-knit that fabric of downtown. This is an opportunity to take down walls and barriers in many different ways.”

Reconnect Austin proposes to lower the main lanes of I-35 and cover the highway with a cap, creating an active surface-level boulevard. The idea is that instead of simply building more lanes for cars – which research has [shown](#) to be ineffective in reducing traffic – the re-worked design could reconnect the urban grid, increase transportation options and free up for development the land that is currently under frontage roads.

That newly created land is estimated to provide an additional \$10 billion in new property tax value, which would directly benefit state and local taxing jurisdictions. In addition to new tax base and traffic throughput, other benefits include new land for affordable housing adjacent to the region’s job center, improvements to air and water quality, and better connectivity with safe options for all road users.

Business Insider recently ranked Austin as the top economic powerhouse in Texas and the third across the U.S. Yet the city’s economic engine – its downtown – is severely compromised by the presence of I-35, the proponents of Reconnect Austin argue, since its monolithic concrete structure cuts off pedestrian connectivity between downtown and East Austin.

“It’s the last best way to heal the huge problem that is I-35,” said Black + Vernooy principal Sinclair Black, who has been advocating for walkable urban design and planning in Austin for decades. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

The aging elevated highway structure, built in the 1950s, is slated for reconstruction, and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is currently completing a second environmental assessment.

During its first round of studies for the project, 98 percent of people attending open houses said they would prefer depressed lanes through downtown. Reconnect Austin has also garnered the support of local politicians.

John McKinnerney, founding principal at Capital Partners and 2018 ULI Impact Awards judge, said he sees it as an opportunity to bring two halves of the city back together.

“It could get rid of this misnomer we use of ‘East Austin’ and ‘West Austin,’” McKinnerney said. “It’s the same city. I mean, we’re all on the same team. And so this project could really alleviate some of those tensions and some of those views, no matter what side of town you live on.”

The ULI Next Big Idea Award is the latest of many recognitions Reconnect Austin has received, yet another step in the movement’s ongoing fight to remake a key slice of Texas’ capital city.

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