

Three Myths About Transportation in Austin

Prepared for **City Manager Spencer Cronk**, the City of Austin

By **Black + Vernooy** Architecture and Urban Design

February 8, 2019

Myth 1

We can build our way out of traffic

Despite the Texas Department of Transportation's insistence — and the common public belief — that widening and building more of roads and highways is the only solution for the Austin metro's current traffic, **there are countless examples of traffic increasing after additional road capacity is constructed:**

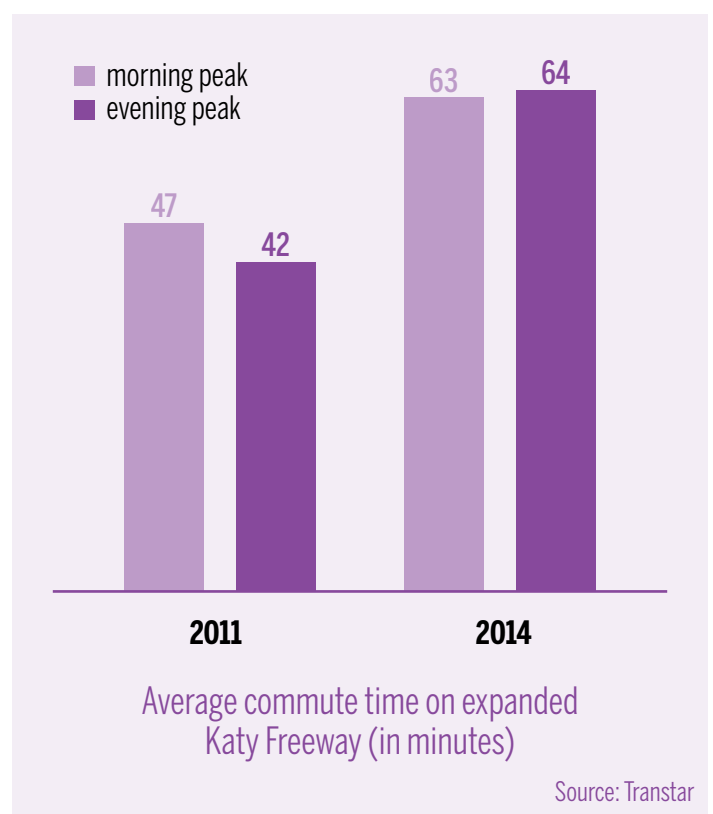
Katy Freeway A three-year, \$2.8-billion expansion of the [Katy Freeway](#) in Houston to 26 total lanes (close to 500 feet wide) was heralded by the American Highway Users Alliance (an advocacy group representing the automotive and road-construction industries) as a resounding success in the fight against traffic congestion. But subsequent studies showed that over the three years following the project's completion, commute times on the freeway went *up* by about 30 percent in the mornings — from 47 to 63 minutes — and 55 percent in the evenings — from 42 to 64 minutes (see images).

MoPac Closer to home, after the long-awaited [MoPac express lane](#) expansion — also sold as a congestion-relief project — was completed in October 2017, the freeway saw close to 30,000 additional vehicles using it per day, longer commute times on some sections, and a host of new backups on feeder roads. The Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority even admitted that it had not modelled traffic on any roads besides MoPac itself when planning the project.

These examples reflect the reality of **induced demand**: **when people are presented with more of something (be it cookies or freeways) — or when something is made cheaper — they are more likely to consume or use it.** Expanding the road network increases the demand for it, leading to more car trips and more traffic: a vicious cycle that cannot be beaten. TxDOT and the road-building establishment do not factor induced demand into their models — nor do they seriously consider any options for moving people besides private vehicles.



Source: Houston Chronicle



The Katy Freeway

It is now the widest in North America and has no traffic reduction to show for it.



Single road project =
\$8.1 billion
 (I-35 tri-county expansion)

Image source: KXAN/TxDOT



Entire transit system =
\$8 billion
 (Project Connect plan)

Image source: Capital Metro

Myth 2

Good public transit is too expensive

In terms of moving people, public and active (walking, bicycling) transportation modes are more efficient and cost-effective than automobiles, especially given the reality of induced demand. Take just one road project out of many in Central Texas: the [183 South Expressway](#) project — which is expanding the highway to 12 lanes and eliminating several cross-streets and pedestrian connections — is expected to [cost](#) \$743 million. In comparison, the entire City of Austin [2016 mobility bond](#) — which includes funding for nine multimodal corridors designed to improve mobility for all users, the Vision Zero initiative, urban trails, safe routes to school, and so forth — was \$720 million.

Another example: TxDOT’s proposed plans to add lanes to I-35 in Williamson, Hays, and Travis counties [amount to](#) \$8.1 billion in taxpayer costs. For the cost of this one project — let alone the numerous [other](#) road construction projects, which represent combined investments of tens of billions of dollars — we could fund Capital Metro’s entire planned [Project Connect](#) network of high-capacity rail and bus rapid transit lines, projected to [cost](#) \$6 to 8 billion.

Myth 3

Building roads advances local policy

In fact, **road expansion projects go against both the spirit and the letter of the majority of Austin’s planning documents.** A prime example: City Council [recently voted](#) to contribute \$3.3 million to TxDOT’s \$545 million [Oak Hill Parkway](#) project, which will construct a massive freeway segment through the Y, where highways 290 and 71 converge (see image on p. 4). This, too, has been sold as a congestion-easing solution, despite the fact that it will certainly cause traffic to worsen and encourage further suburban sprawl on the periphery of the Austin metro, which will, in turn, lead to further increased traffic on these highways. The project will also remove some 280-plus protected, heritage, and legacy trees in the area and cause environmental distress to nearby Williamson Creek — which will be channelized — the beloved natural amenity of Barton Creek, and the Edwards Aquifer, on whose recharge zone it sits.

These eventualities actively contradict the stated priorities of the following City of Austin master plans:

City of Austin Action Plan (2016–2017) Continuing to prioritize the road system will compound the inherent inequality of a transportation system that requires citizens to take on the substantial financial burden of owning a private vehicle. Road building is not a long-term solution to Austin’s affordability crisis, calculations about which must take into account the cost of both housing and transportation.

Austin Bicycle Master Plan (2014) The freeway project makes bicycling more dangerous and the bicycling network less connective in this area.

Austin’s Community Climate Plan Adding additional capacity for automobiles entrenches dependency on a highly carbon-inefficient form of transportation that is a major contributor to climate change.

Austin Parks Department Long-Range Master Plan Channelizing Williamson Creek and paving over much of this environmentally sensitive area does not represent responsible stewardship of Austin’s natural recreational amenities, whose ecologies are interconnected.

Austin Strategic Mobility Plan (ASMP) Austin cannot build more roads, which encourage people to remain reliant on automobiles, and also expect its priorities of

increased transit/pedestrian/bicycle accessibility to somehow manifest themselves. We have an intertwined system of transportation choices and land-use patterns.

Austin’s Urban Forest Plan (2013) Destroying 280 protected, heritage, and legacy trees contradicts stewardship of the urban forest.

Barton Springs Pool Master Plan Increased impervious cover and automobile usage will lead to more toxic runoff into the Barton Creek watershed that feeds Barton Springs.

CreateAustin Cultural Master Plan New roads do little to advance cultural vitality and a sense of place; compare this to a vision a human-scaled [Oak Hill town center](#) (see image on next page) that could promote cultural exchange, public art, and community events.

Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan Road expansion actively counteracts the vision of a “compact and connected” Austin built around human-scaled urban, town, and neighborhood centers and active-transportation connections. In the plan (see image below), the Y is labeled as an activity center for redevelopment in an environmentally sensitive area, connected to high-capacity transit: this calls for denser redevelopment with particular sensitivity to environmental impact — neither of which the Oak Hill Parkway project advances.

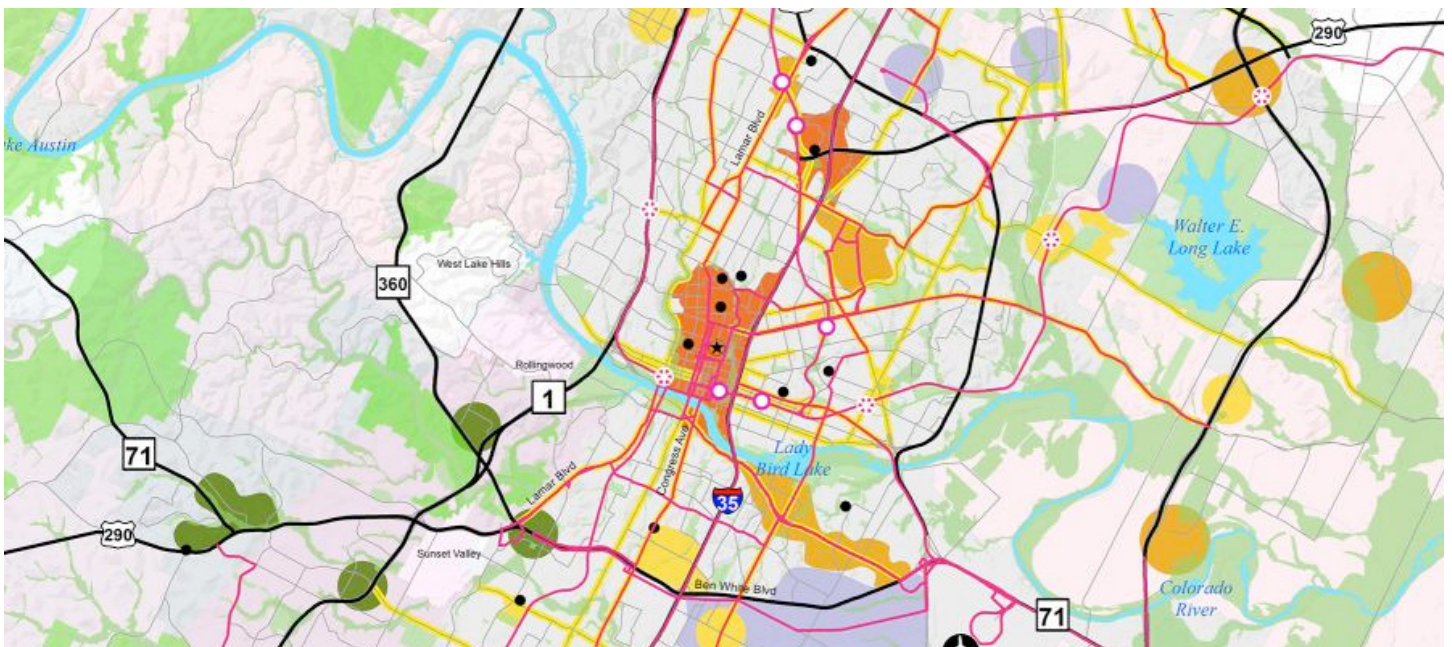


Image source: City of Austin

Imagine Austin

The city’s comprehensive plan calls for dense, mixed-use urban and neighborhood centers served by high-quality transit. We won’t get there by continuing to build roads.



Image sources: TxDOT, Save Oak Hill

Committing to the vision

The Oak Hill Parkway project is a ground zero for committing to the vision of Imagine Austin. The City of Austin must stand up to TxDOT and support the goal of walkable town centers with a sense of place, like this proposed Old Town Oak Hill, instead of placeless freeways and flyovers.

Sidewalk Program and Master Plan Wider roads and freeways, by virtue of being uncomfortable pedestrian environments, actively deter pedestrians from walking in the area, and increase the safety hazard if people have no other choice but to walk, especially if there are reduced pedestrian crossings. In addition, a freeway is in no way a [Street as Place](#).

Vision Zero Action Plan High-speed freeway environments are the primary locations of traffic deaths. (26 percent of City of Austin traffic fatalities occurred on the I-35 corridor in 2018.)

Watershed Protection Master Plan The Y sits at the junction of the Edwards Aquifer and Barton Creek recharge zones, and additional road space negatively impacts both of these through increased impervious cover and toxic runoff.

Sources City Observatory, CityLab, Community Impact, The Austin Monitor, The Austin American-Statesman, Texas Department of Transportation, Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, The City of Austin

In conclusion, road building and road-expansion projects within cities:

- Are proven not to reduce traffic in the long term.
- Contribute to an unsustainable automobile-dependent transportation system.
- Represent a significant public expenditure for meager return on investment.
- Actively undercut a host of City of Austin policies and master plans.

The alternative Through policy, executive action, and city management, the City of Austin should actively work toward its many stated goals of a more compact, connected, and environmentally aware city by prioritizing active transportation — public transportation, bicycling, and walking — through the infrastructure that enables them and the compact building patterns that support them.

The end result A healthier, happier, more environmentally responsible Austin of human-scaled places where people can enjoy being in community with each other.

