

TEXAS ARCHITECT



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Inching Forward

AUSTIN It took two years longer than expected, but Austin is inching its way closer to renovating the well-known, well-traveled Drag, the ten-block section of Guadalupe Street stretching along the west side of the University of Texas (UT). The struggle—which included one demonstration project and a near-death letter from the general manager of the city’s mass transportation agency, Capital Metro—has boiled down to a discussion of lanes: for buses, bikes, and light rail.

Efforts by the University Area Partners (UAP), a neighborhood group of merchants and residents, to renovate the slowly deteriorating Drag (see *TA*, November/December 1997) got a jolt in 1995 with several coincidences: the development of the UT master plan, which defined the Drag as an “edges priority”; the identification of the street by Capital Metro as a transit improvement initiative, which brought with it funds through the Build Greater Austin program; and support in the form of a resolution from the Austin City Council. A design plan creating a “pedestrian-dominated” project was developed by the local firm of Black & Vernooy. It included amenities such as wider sidewalks, trees, and historic lights mixed with four 10-foot-wide traffic lanes and two five-foot-wide bike lanes, and eliminated turning lanes. The initial schematics also dedicated one of the street’s lanes to the expected, if distant, arrival of light rail.

The project’s construction hinged on a November 1997 demonstration—with new lane widths marked by paint and bike routes indicated by pavers—that simulated the traffic flow impact. Kit Krankel, project manager with Black & Vernooy, says the demo turned out well for almost every party involved. “The demo project showed that there was very little impact on traffic, which was the university’s main concern,” she says. Some complaints came from cyclists who were used to riding in the old two-way lane on the university edge; some were also upset at riding between parked cars and the sidewalk on the merchant side of the street. “It was hard for the demo project to measure how well the design will work for them,” says Krankel.

Cyclists were not the only group with reservations. Although Capital Metro was “pleased with the outcome of the demo project,” says Andre Tanner, senior project manager with the agency, it is still unwilling to give the go ahead until a resolution is reached on the issue of lane width. At the time of the demo project, Capital Metro indicated its belief that 10-foot lanes

would not be wide enough to accommodate buses, which stretch 102 inches side-to-side but 122 to 132 inches mirror-to-mirror. For Capital Metro, the demo project cemented its position that outside lanes of 11 feet are necessary. “We need to figure out where to come up with the necessary footage,” says Tanner. The issue “will get worked out by further consideration being given to 11-foot lanes,” he says.

There is disagreement on where that two feet will come from. Matt Kite, assistant director of public works with the City of Austin, says that the city would like bike lanes, and the “general direction is to relocate the sidewalk line to accommodate the extra width needed for bikes and buses.”

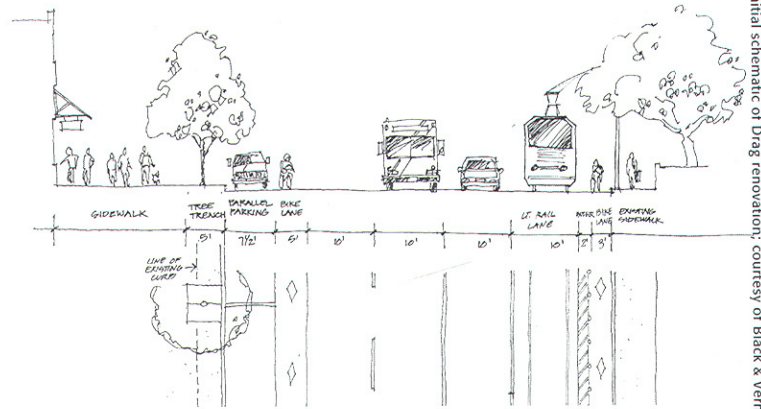
Krankel says, “We need to find two more feet, and to do that, we need to decide what’s going to give. The lane width is really not up to us—it’s a policy issue to be negotiated between the city and Capital Metro. . . . If we absolutely have to get two feet, it will come from the bike lanes—we’ll have to eliminate them altogether.”

For its part, UT, which at the start of the demonstration seemed the most hesitant party, has signed off on the project. “Once the demo project showed us that the traffic could flow, we kind of got out of it. . . . We are convinced the project is a good idea,” says Steve Kraal, associate director of business services in the office of campus planning and facility management at UT.

The project’s fortunes have also shifted with the light rail winds drifting through Austin. The city had focused its initial light rail plans on a track, running on existing railroad lines, through the east side of the city. The plans changed this spring, with a new proposal for an initial line running through the center of the city and including the Drag, says Krankel. About the same time the new proposal was released, the Capital Metro board received an abrupt letter from the agency’s general manager calling for the cancellation of the \$2.25-million Drag project. The board eventually restated that it was behind the project, and wanted it to move forward, says Krankel. “They want us to

reexamine how light rail will fit. We need to make them comfortable that none of the improvements will have to come out when light rail goes in.”

Kite, with the city, assesses the light rail fears as unfounded. “Light rail has no bearing in my mind on this project. The area is already planned to accommodate it. It would have a bearing if we were building an expensive project in the area,” he says. For Kite, the more pressing issue is the effect



Initial schematic of Drag renovations; courtesy of Black & Vernooy

the sidewalk and street relocation will have on the city’s utilities. “Utilities are a major component of most street projects. . . . We need to move expeditiously to resolve the utility issues. . . . If the design is changed, it affects the utilities,” says Kite.

For UAP, what started as an attempt to improve the downward slide of the street has turned into a crash course on the complex, interrelated layers involved in an urban project. “Roadways are used for more than just surface transportation,” says McHone. “[On the Drag], there is a tremendous amount of east-west pedestrian traffic, and a significant amount of east-west vehicular traffic. It is also a major transit corridor, and serves as an underground utility delivery system. The project affects all the layers.”

If all the parties are able to hash out the remaining details, construction should begin during the early months of 1999, with phase one complete by August 1999. Phases two and three would be completed in subsequent years, based on available funds.

The general consensus is still that the process has been an important one. “Everybody will have to coexist, as they already do. We will come to a compromise that accomplishes everything. . . . This is one of the first times we’ve all come together. And in spite of our best wishes, there are things we don’t have control over,” says McHone.

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