

“Streets Are for People”: A Culminating Report on Austin’s Great Streets Program and the 2nd Street District

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Abstract

Title: “Streets Are for People”: A Culminating Report on Austin’s Great Streets Program and the 2nd Street District

Internal reviewer: Addie Walker

This report was prepared by Loan Ha, an Urban Studies student at The University of Texas at Austin, as a research internship with Black + Motal Architecture and Urban Design within the Planning Department. Black + Motal is an Austin-based architecture and urban design firm that has been led for nearly 60 years by Principal Sinclair Black and Managing Partner Stephi Motal. The firm played a leading role in shaping Austin urban landscapes with projects like Central Market and Seaholm Power Plant redevelopments, and additionally developed Austin's Great Streets Master Plan, a long-term urban design framework that has guided the transformation of downtown streets into walkable, people-centered public spaces.

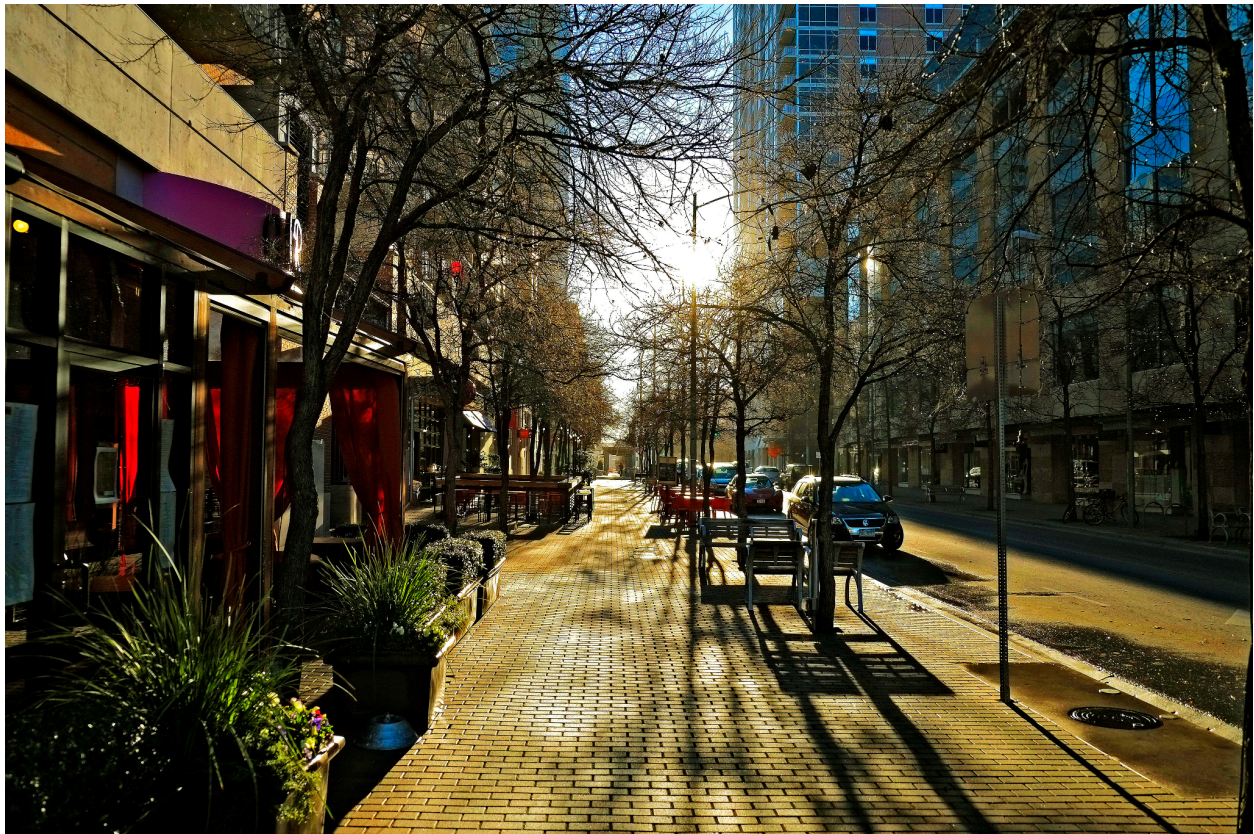
The purpose of this report is to educate and raise awareness about Great Streets, including the history, development, implementation, and evolution of the Great Streets Program, with a particular focus on the 2nd Street Retail District as one of the program's earliest and most influential implementations. The secondary purpose of the report is to create an archive of information on the history, implementation, and successes and failures over time of Great Streets. As time passes from the creation of the master plan, the people involved are retiring and leaving the field, and so this report aims to capture their personal and institutional knowledge regarding Great Streets.

To provide both historical and contemporary perspectives, this research draws upon planning documents, various case studies, City of Austin records, and interviews with key individuals involved in the program's development and implementation. Interviewees include Sinclair Black, Stephi Motal, Jana McCann, Jill Amezcua, Girard Kinney, Donna Carter, Amalia Carmona, and other planners, designers, and City staff who have contributed to the Great Streets Program or its current update. Their insights provide context on the program's original vision, implementation strategies, successes, present-day challenges, and future opportunities.

By bringing together historical research and firsthand perspectives, this report is intended for local government, including City Council; professional organizations, including AIA; relevant firms and offices such as architects, planners, and designers; and advocacy organizations. These groups have been interested in learning about Great Streets and the ongoing program update, as this report is meant to be a singular resource for understanding the history of Great Streets and its evolution from the 1990s through August 2026, and is to be used for education and awareness purposes.

Great Streets came from a vision over 25 years ago, and until now, there was not a comprehensive resource for learning its history and implementation. The information in this report is gathered from multiple sources, including subjective accounts that may differ from one another. Given the time that has passed since the original Master Plan, specifics in this report may differ slightly between references.

Figure 1.
Great Streets on 2nd Street; showing active frontage and wide sidewalks.



Note. Photograph courtesy of Black + Motal, 2016.

Introduction: What is Great Streets?

The Great Streets Master Plan (GSMP) is a comprehensive and integrated urban design strategy aimed at transforming 306 block faces of public right-of-way (ROW) in downtown Austin. The Great Streets program is changing the character of downtown Austin by expanding sidewalks and adding amenities to enhance the public realm (Black Vernooy, n.d.). It shifts the traditional view that streets primarily exist to facilitate the efficient movement of vehicles.

The City of Austin's Great Streets program, which the GSMP guides, is funded through a combination of public and private investment, providing a coordinated framework for improving downtown streetscapes while encouraging long-term economic growth. At its core, the GSMP promotes the concept of "streets for people," recognizing that successful downtown streets are destinations in themselves rather than simply routes for moving traffic. Its objectives include improving walkability, enhancing the public realm, calming traffic, encouraging alternative modes of transportation, supporting mixed-use development, stimulating economic activity, and creating an aesthetically pleasing environment (Black + Vernooy Architecture, 2002).

This vision stems from downtown Austin's design guidelines, which established a set of values for development, including authenticity, history, safety, diversity, humane character, density, economic vitality, and civic art (Buntin, 2006). The guidelines rank their priorities as follows: pedestrians are at the top of the hierarchy, followed by transit, bicycles, and finally automobiles. The main argument for the Great Streets initiative is: "If downtown is a destination, why are we designing streets to help people leave it?"

The concept of Great Streets emerged from the book "*Great Streets*," written by Allan Jacobs, a professor of urban design at the University of California, Berkeley (Black, 2025). In this seminal book, Jacobs analyzed exceptional streets around the world and identified specific factors that contribute to vibrant urban spaces, such as the Ramblas in Barcelona and the Champs-Élysées in Paris. He suggested that the same physical elements that create great streets can be applied in other cities as well. According to Jacobs, great streets are not just conduits for cars; they are public living rooms. To be effective, they require human-scaled definitions, with balanced building heights relative to street widths, wide tree-lined sidewalks, weather protection, and designs that ensure safety for both pedestrians and drivers.

By studying Great Streets in detail, it was identified that factors such as similarly sized buildings, interesting facades, trees, windows that offer inviting views, walkable stretches, and spaces for leisurely activities are essential for transforming streets into better public realms. Even with Great Street features added, the ultimate impact of great streets is shaped by how the city plans and designs downtown streets.

Sinclair Black, a member of the Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA) and the streetscape committee, introduced concepts from the book into discussions at DAA committee meetings. Lucy Galbraith of the DAA staff also advocated for dedicated funding from the Public Works Department.

Figure 2.
Great Streets on 2nd Street



Note. Photograph courtesy Black + Motal, 2007.

Figure 3.
Butterfly Bridge



Note. Photograph courtesy Black + Motal.

Historical breakdown: The Evolution of Austin's Great Streets Master Plan

Rapid Urban Growth: Austin's Mid-Century Urban Decline

During the mid-twentieth century, American cities experienced significant suburban expansion driven by major federal investments in highway infrastructure, specifically following the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. In Austin, the construction of Interstate 35 and other transportation improvements expanded outwards, encouraging residential development in the suburbs and increasing automobile dependence (Gottdiener et al., 2019; Texas Department of Transportation, n.d.). As more residents relocated outside the center of the cities, downtown increasingly became a destination for employment rather than everyday living.

This shift had profound effects on the character of downtown. While thousands of commuters traveled into the city for work, relatively few remained after business hours, contributing to declining retail activity, restaurant closures, and reduced street life. At the same time, downtowns shifted their attention to vehicular traffic, often at the expense of the pedestrian environment. Roads were widened,

sidewalks were narrowed or neglected, and public spaces became less inviting for social interaction and everyday activity.

In response, the city began exploring strategies to revitalize the downtown through public investment, urban design, and economic development efforts. It recognized streets as valuable public space capable of attracting people, supporting businesses, and strengthening the socioeconomic vitality of the downtown, rather than viewing them as transportation corridors. Nationwide planning trends laid the foundation for Austin to reimagine its downtown streets through initiatives like Great Streets (Widdicombe, 2010).

Figure 4.
1985, Walker Tips Co. HQ, 200 W. 2nd St.



Note. From PICH-05202, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Figure 5.
Schneider Store Streets Surrounding; Demonstrating Right-Of-Way Allocation



Note. From PICH-01948, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

1990s Right-of-Way Allocation:

Vehicles (75%)	Pedestrians (25%)
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By the 1990s, downtown Austin had become entirely automobile-oriented. Approximately 75% of the public ROW was dedicated to vehicle lanes, leaving a small margin of 25% for pedestrian sidewalks (Black + Vernooy Architecture, 2002). The urban core lacked a bustling, active street life where people could linger, walk, and shop. Furthermore, according to architect and urban advocate Sinclair Black, the implementation of one-way street grids, synchronized traffic signals, and high speed limits optimized automobile flow at the direct expense of pedestrian safety and comfort.

This car-centric environment accelerated a sharp decline in downtown retail and community vitality. Businesses shuttered their doors, and physical infrastructure deteriorated; sidewalks were frequently covered in dirt, disrupted by potholes, or flooded with standing water. This baseline of physical

decay prompted a critical push by city leadership and community advocates to radically revitalize the downtown.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Austin's Downtown

Despite these setbacks, downtown Austin remained the economic and social heart of the region, anchored by unique institutional and geographical advantages. To pave the way forward, urban planners isolated the core strengths and systemic weaknesses of the 1990s downtown ecosystem (Austin R/UDAT Committee, 1991):

Strengths

- **Natural Geography and Amenities:** A physical setting on the Colorado River at the threshold of the Texas Hill Country, enriched by natural assets like Lady Bird Lake (then Town Lake), Waller Creek, Shoal Creek, and Barton Springs.
- **Blends of Politics and University Culture:** Guaranteed consumers and economic stability driven by the University of Texas at Austin, the State Capitol, and associated state government agencies filled with Texas culture, education, and big ideas.
- **Austin Pride:** A community that is ethnically, socially, and culturally diverse with a high level of civic engagement and a strong sense of identity.
- **Economic Foundation:** A robust regional economy capable of attracting capital investment and visitor tourism.

Weaknesses

- **Leakage:** Limited local economic benefits from major population centers; students and state government facilities generate high foot traffic but low direct retail profits for downtown businesses due to weak leakage in two major areas towards downtown: bad sidewalks and poor street design.
- **Socio-Spatial Segregation:** The physical barrier of Interstate 35, which separates downtown from East Austin, brings racial and economic segregation.
- **Losing Downtown's Historic Role:** Austin's shopping hub identity is degrading. Only a few stores remain and only offer basic convenience items for office workers, and the mix of retail types is limited. As a result, the economy and real estate market are stalled out.
- **Decentralization:** Intense competition for resources as public and private investments favored suburban expansion, including the development of high-rise office towers and major retail centers outside the central business district.

- **Inefficient Development:** A lack of an underlying urban vision or concept guiding development results in fragmented basic infrastructure and development projects, with a lack of public accountability.
- **Neglected Pedestrian Infrastructure:** Uneven, block-by-block street-level scaling, poor pedestrian connectivity, and an unattractive walking environment (ex. lack of inclusion, unsanitary and unsafe conditions) that discouraged exploration.
- **Lack of Centralized Leadership:** No unified advocacy, management, or promotional group represents downtown business interests, resulting in uncoordinated organizational efforts.

R/UDAT and the "Streets for People" Vision

Downtown Austin in the 1990s required specialized intervention, with more businesses struggling and foot traffic declining. The area was becoming a place to pass by rather than a place to be; the City of Austin, the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, and the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) invited the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) to assess the city (Austin R/UDAT Committee, 1991).

Managed by the national AIA, the R/UDAT's objective was to analyze existing conditions, translate community interests into an actionable strategy, and spark public-private partnerships. Following the extensive field study, R/UDAT released two foundation reports; the first was the 1991 recommendation, the original comprehensive vision report for revitalization which ultimately had no implementation. The second was the R/UDAT revisited 1997 "A call to finish," a follow-up led by Mayor Kirk Watson and the Austin R/UDAT Revisited Committee to finish the work begun by assessing what had been accomplished and what remained to be done, with a targeted short list of practical, high-priority projects to start development (Austin R/UDAT Revisited Committee, 1997).

Core R/UDAT Recommendations:

- Establish downtown as a primary regional destination.
- Prioritize pedestrian safety, comfort, and mobility over high-speed vehicles.
- Convert high-speed one-way streets back into a traffic-calming two-way layout.
- Improve the street-level experience to foster vibrant, active, and inclusive public spaces.
- Strengthen physical, psychological, and visual connections between fragmented downtown districts.

Downtown Austin Alliance Advocacy

Sinclair Black & The DAA Meetings (Mid-1990s):

Austin architect and UT professor Sinclair Black brought Allan Jacobs' book *Great Streets* into DAA committee meetings (Black, 2025). He used Jacobs' detailed analysis of world-famous pedestrian streets to show DAA members and city leaders what downtown Austin's streetscapes could look like.

Adoption of the Program (1996):

Inspired by these discussions and Jacobs' book, the DAA officially adopted a "Great Streets" program in 1996 and lobbied the city government for dedicated funding.

From R/UDAT to Master Plan (1997–2003)

When R/UDAT returned in 1997 to assess implementation progress, they reiterated the need for concrete spatial reallocations. Their most significant contribution was urging the city to reallocate the physical right-of-way by shifting the distribution from 75% roads / 25% sidewalks to a more cohesive, balanced 55% roads / 45% sidewalks (Black + Vernoooy Architecture, 2002).

Proposed Great Streets Right-of-Way Reallocation:

Vehicles (55%)	Pedestrians (45%)
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On November 6, 1997, the Austin City Council formally adopted these concepts through Resolution 971106-23. This resolution established comprehensive urban design guidelines to integrate downtown transportation operations with a pedestrian-first streetscape.

The Implementation Timeline

1998: Capital Funding & Smart Growth

The city passed a \$5 million municipal bond dedicated to Great Streets infrastructure. Simultaneously, they implemented the Smart Growth Matrix, an incentive program offering development fee waivers to private projects that integrated these new pedestrian standards (Scenic Texas, 2025; City of Austin, n.d.).

1999:

The Austin City Council passed a resolution to “ensure the West 2nd Street area is transformed to support pedestrian- and retail-oriented businesses” (Buntin, 2006).

2000:

On May 18, 2000, the City Council officially adopted the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines, codifying six core urban values: Authenticity, History, Safety, Density, Diversity, and Economic Vitality (City of Austin, 2020).

2001: The Great Streets Master Plan

The Great Streets Master Plan was prepared in 2001 as a City of Austin Capital Improvement Program (CIP) Project NO 8760-607-2107 by the joint venture of Black + Vernoooy (now known as Black + Motal) and Kinney & Associates.

Sinclair Black was the project principal, and Girard Kinney was the project manager for the entire venture. The joint venture also included Donna Carter, transportation planner, and Eleanor McKinney, landscape designer, as two of the core members of the consultant team to create a master plan for the central business district inspired by Allan Jacobs’ book, *Great Streets* (Black + Vernoooy Architecture, 2002).

The City of Austin side of the project was led by Jana McCann, the city’s Urban Design Officer. Jana McCann and her team completed the technical and community review process, including overseeing the contract, leading the consultants, and ensuring the final master plan met the city’s goals.

2001–2003: The Flagship Proof of Concept

The City launched its first major physical intervention through a CIP: the 2nd Street Retail District and Cesar Chavez Promenade (City of Austin, n.d.). Delivered as a coordinated project, this flagship Great Streets initiative successfully demonstrated the socioeconomic value of wide sidewalks, shade trees, outdoor restaurant seating, and active, transparent storefronts, ultimately triggering a wave of new private development along the corridor.

2003: Secure fundings

To ensure long-term viability, the City Council established the Great Streets Parking Meter Fund. This policy legally allocated 30% of downtown parking meter revenue for ongoing Great Streets funding. Generating roughly \$728,000 per year, this fund secured a permanent capital stream for continuous

streetscape modernization. It was used to implement the Great Streets standards by supplementing CIP projects and cost-sharing with private developments via the Great Streets Development Program (GSDP) (City of Austin, n.d.).

2014:

City Council established Great Streets as a Downtown Density Bonus Program (DDBP) gatekeeper requirement (Scenic Texas, 2025).

Figure 6.
Current State of 2nd St



Note. Photograph taken by Loan Ha, 2026.

Figure 7.
Brazos St Numerical Requirement Implemented



Challenges During Early Great Streets Program Integration

According to Donna Carter and Girard Kinney, the core team that worked on creating GSMP proposed a recommendation that was ultimately not included in the official master plan due to various conflicts. One major point of contention was whether to add a public restroom facility; this became a significant debate, and in the end, they lost the argument for its inclusion.

Additionally, there was tension over the type of streetscape furniture to use. The goal was to keep it user-friendly, but there was also concern about how best to manage unhoused individuals. For instance, the idea of benches received pushback when suggestions arose to incorporate knobs or hinges to prevent individuals from lying down on them.

Another debate revolved around signage, particularly the potential addition of large billboards downtown. Stakeholders were worried that these billboards might obstruct the view of buildings, detracting from the overall aesthetics of downtown.

Lastly, there was a discussion about adding pedestrian diagonal crossing sections at major intersections to facilitate more efficient movement for pedestrians. However, this idea was ultimately not implemented due to traffic concerns.

Development of Second Street: Mixed-Use Retail District

What is 2nd Street?

The Second Street Retail District is a vibrant six-block mixed-use area that stretches from San Antonio Street to Colorado Street. This district combines office space, residential areas, retail shops, and public spaces, creating a people-centered environment. Visitors can enjoy a walkable urban experience, shop at local boutiques, dine at a variety of restaurants, and participate in downtown activities near major entertainment destinations. Additionally, Second Street features an array of murals, interactive sculptures, and civic installations. Notable artworks include the towering 100-story Tau Ceti mural and Kempelen's Owls. These public art pieces provide a unique open-air art experience right in the heart of downtown (City of Austin, n.d.).

Historically, 2nd Street served as an industrial and commercial zone. Recognizing the area's potential, the City of Austin aimed to transform these underutilized blocks, including a former water treatment facility, into a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly environment (Buntin, 2006).

Figure 8.

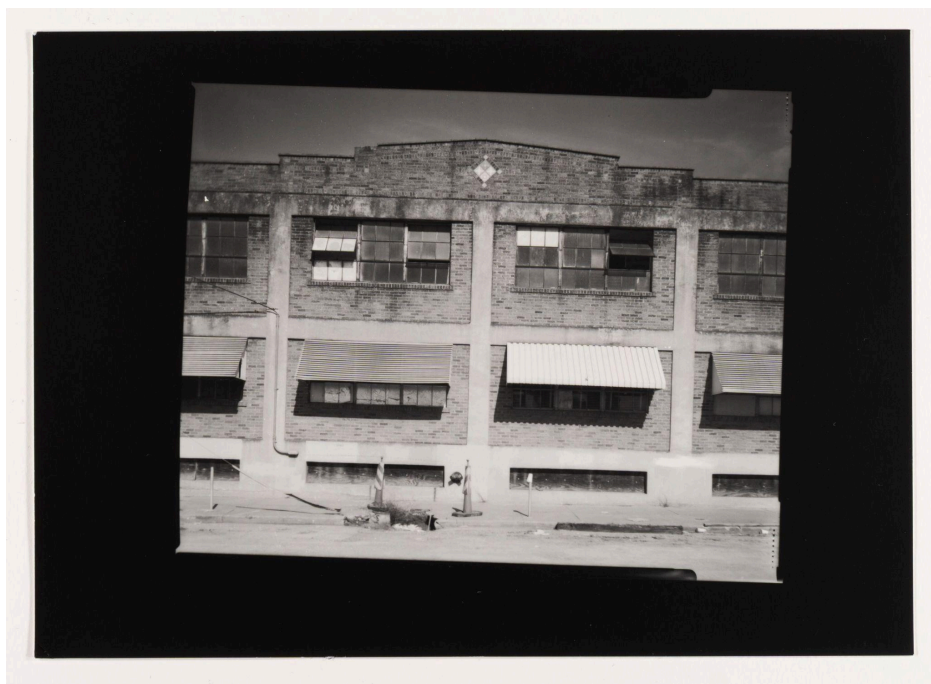
View of the South Facade of the former Walter Tips Co. Warehouse on 200 Colorado St.



Note. PICH-13841, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Figure 9.

South Facade of former Walker Tips Co. Warehouse on 200 Colorado St.



Note. PICH-13845, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

The 2nd Street District emerged from this vision as a key part of the city's efforts to revitalize downtown. It was designed to convert the largely industrial and neglected area into a destination where people could live, work, play, and visit. The 2nd Street District is bounded by West César Chávez, San Antonio, West 3rd, and Colorado Streets, encompassing blocks 2, 3, 4, 20, 21, and 22 of the original City of Austin (City of Austin, n.d.).

Additionally, the City of Austin owns the ground-floor retail spaces of blocks 2 and 4, while the ground leases of block 22 are held by AMLI.

Construction Timeline

The transformation of 2nd Street from a desolate stretch of old warehouses into the thriving Great Streets destination it is today was completed in phases between the 2000s and 2010s:

1991 to 2001: The City of Austin established the initial vision for 2nd Street in the GSMP. In 1999, ROMA Design Group was hired by AMLI Residential to develop a retail and streetscape concept plan. The resulting *Second Street Retail District Streetscape Plan*, published in 2000, helped inform the subsequent development of the GSMP.

The Streetscape Plan was incorporated in the GSMP, published in 2001, which called for 2nd Street to be a two-lane shopping street with a 32-foot-wide sidewalk and parallel parking.

2001: Two CSC buildings on either side of City Hall (Block 2 and 4) were completed. The city also constructed a connecting tunnel and funded improvements to city property and ROW (Buntin, 2006).

Before 2004: Roadway development converted 2nd Street to two-way traffic between Brazos Street and Colorado Street, while extending improvements east toward San Antonio Street and incorporating the major intersection of Congress Avenue and 2nd Street.

2004: In January, the Frost Bank Tower (began construction November 27, 2001) was built on the eastern edge of the district (Wikipedia, 2024). The new Austin City Hall and Public Plaza officially opened in November. ALMI downtown (201 Lavaca St.), which has 7 stores and 220 units, was completed (Taco Street Locating, n.d.).

2006: The 2nd Street District was officially opened to the public.

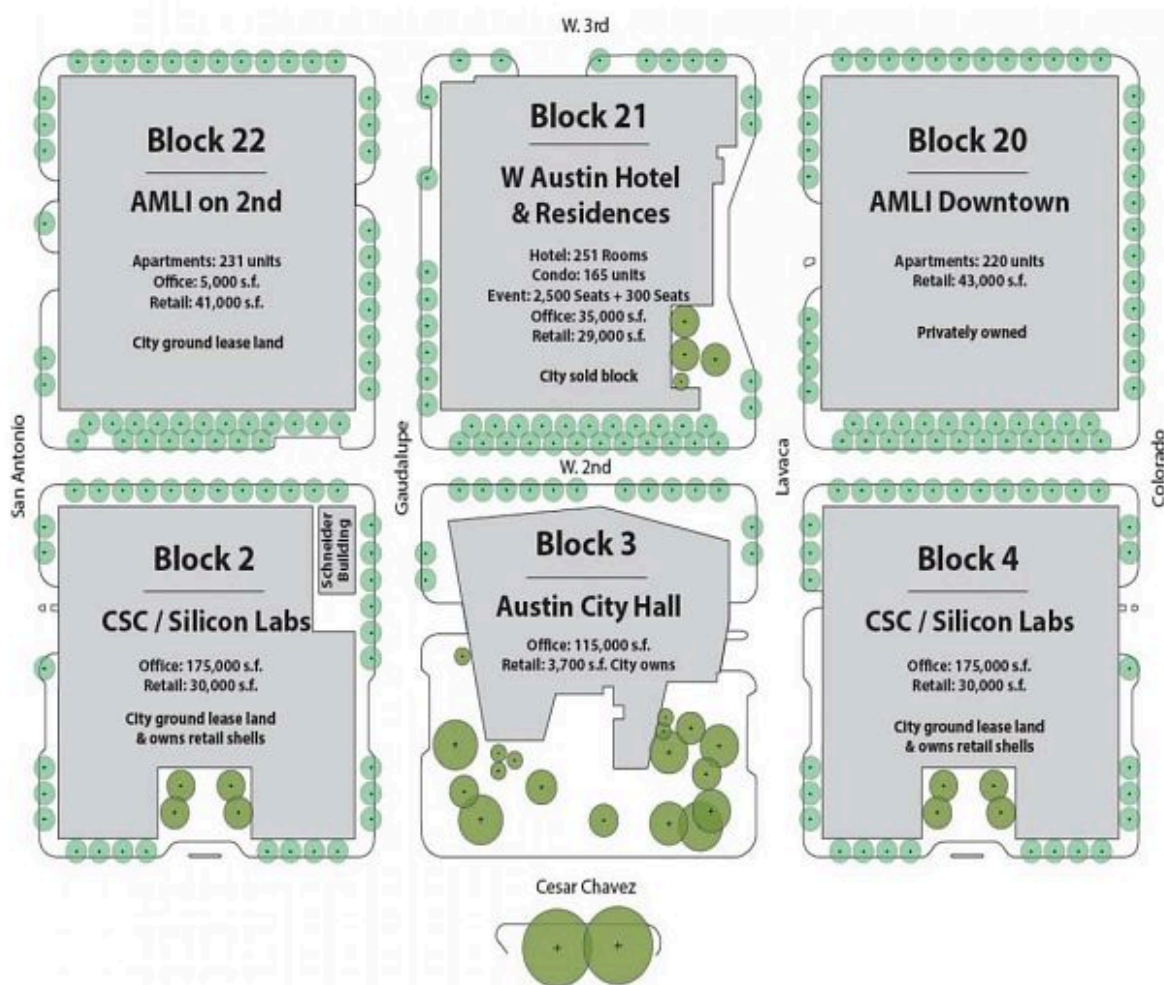
2007: AMLI on 2nd (431 W. 3rd St) was completed, with retail opening in 2008 (Taco Street Locating, n.d.).

2010: Block 21, which contained W Austin Hotel, ACL Live at the Moody Theater, and W Residences, was completed (Stratus Properties, n.d.). The initial build-out of the blocks officially concluded, and the street in front of the Moody Theater was renamed Willie Nelson Boulevard.

2017: The final building-out of the district's massive western side was completed, secured by the Google Tower on 500 West 2nd Street and the Aloft Austin Downtown Hotel.

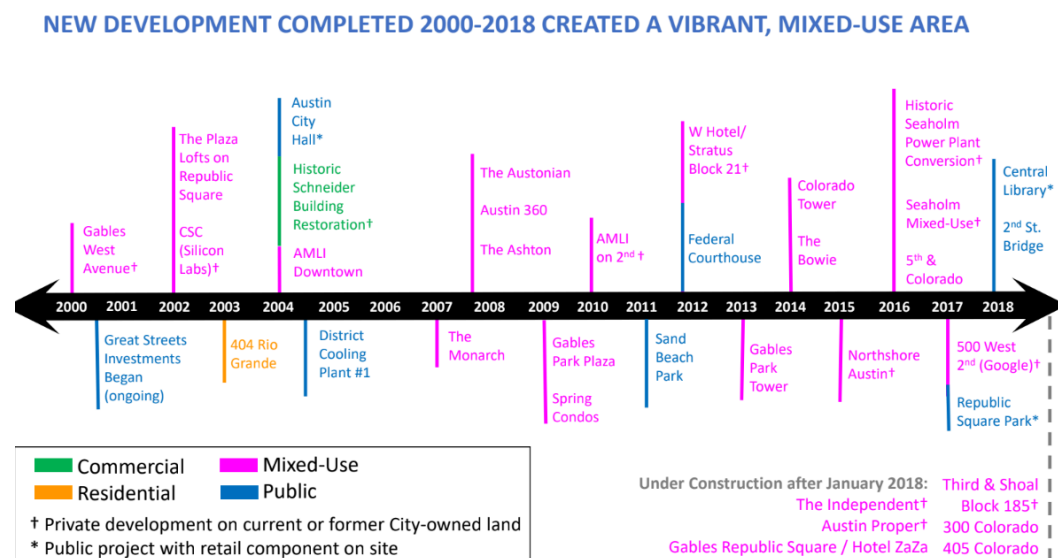
2023 to 2025: Block 21 and the W Austin Hotel underwent a \$50 million renovation, updating rooms and the ground-floor living room (BLUR Workshop, n.d.).

Figure 10.
2nd Street District Map



Note. 2nd Street District Map (Photograph), City of Austin, n.d.

Figure 11.
Visual depiction of the new development timeline.



Note. From *2nd Street & Seaholm Districts - Return on Investment Analysis 2000-2018* (p. 6), by Economic & Planning Systems, Inc., 2020, Prepared for the City of Austin. Copyright 2020 by Economic & Planning Systems, Inc.

Current State of Great Streets in Downtown

Current Great Streets Update

More than twenty-five years after the adoption of the Great Streets Master Plan, the City of Austin is undertaking a comprehensive update, not a replacement, to ensure the program reflects current urban design priorities, environmental conditions, accessibility standards, and the city's evolving transportation network. Rather than revising the original vision, the update seeks to modernize the program while preserving its core objective of creating people-oriented streets that support a vibrant and connected downtown. The update focuses on “back-of-curb” elements such as street trees, bike racks, and wide pedestrian paths to create safe, inviting spaces that encourage walking, lingering, and the use of alternative transportation modes.

The update is led by the Urban Design Division within the City of Austin Housing and Planning Department, under the direction of Jill Amezcua, Program Manager II. The planning process is organized into five phases: Analysis, Community Outreach, Feedback, Production, and Review and Approval.

The completed Analysis phase evaluated existing streetscape conditions in a Conditions Assessment, which evaluated the condition and performance of streetscape improvements installed since

the adoption of the Great Streets Master Plan. The assessment documented implemented block faces and existing streetscape amenities, assigning condition scores from 0 to 5 based on physical condition, maintenance needs, and overall quality (City of Austin Planning Department, n.d.). The update is currently in the community outreach phase, as of August 2026, which emphasizes public participation and stakeholder engagement. Following community outreach, the Urban Design Division (UDD) will compile the feedback and then prepare the draft update during the Production phase before advancing the recommendations through the City's formal review and approval process.

Public Engagement

Public participation is a core component of the Great Streets Update. The City has used multiple engagement methods to gather feedback from residents, businesses, property owners, design professionals, and other downtown stakeholders. These efforts include Community Advisory Group (CAG) meetings, Technical Advisory Group (TAG) meetings, design workshops, open houses, community surveys, and presentations to City boards and commissions.

As of this report's publication in August 2026, there have been 4 CAG meetings. Below are some recommendations that were mentioned in the 1st to 3rd meeting notes:

1. Expand the scope of Great Streets to include areas beyond the original downtown boundaries.
2. Improve connectivity by viewing streets as part of an integrated downtown network that includes transit stations, safe crossings, parks, and trails.
3. Coordinate with Project Connect and major initiatives to avoid interdepartmental conflicts.
4. Enhance the urban tree canopy and provide shade, especially as Austin's climate becomes hotter.
5. Ensure accessibility for all community members by incorporating lighting, a bike lane, and other modes of transit.
6. Incorporate flexibility in design standards, utilizing context-sensitive design tactics.
7. Make streets more of an active facade by promoting outdoor dining, public art, and retail activities.
8. Focus on long-term maintenance improvements.
9. Address climate resilience, including heat management, stormwater control, and sustainability practices.
10. Identify and prioritize what matters most to focus on first and coordinate funding opportunities.
11. Strengthen Austin's identity.

There have been 2 TAG meetings so far, focusing on more of an internal discussion; for example, the July 14th meeting discussed trees, the pedestrian zone, and lighting.

In fall 2025, the City hosted a public open house to introduce the Great Streets Update and invite community members to provide feedback on streetscape elements and pedestrian experiences. The event attracted approximately 75 participants and served as a major public engagement opportunity for the update.

The City also conducted an online community survey that received more than 300 responses. The survey gathered information on mobility patterns, pedestrian safety, accessibility, streetscape conditions, maintenance priorities, and public preferences for future Great Streets improvements. The survey sought to understand how people experience downtown streets, identify opportunities to improve welcoming, safe, or accessible streets, and preferences for physical design elements. Results from the survey, together with recommendations from the CAG and TAG, are helping inform the draft update.

Governance and Decision-making

The Urban Design Division (UDD) within the Planning Department leads this effort, guiding the Program through outreach to City departments, advisory groups, and community organizations. While UDD drives the update process, final decisions are informed by technical reviews, public engagement, and close interdepartmental coordination.

The CAG consists of land use attorneys, landscape architects, architects, and engineers who install Great Streets, providing professional and community perspectives throughout the update process. The TAG consists of Austin Water, Austin Energy, Transportation and Public Works (TPW), the Austin Police Department, the City Arborist, the Economic Development Department, and CapMetro, and evaluates recommendations from engineering, planning, and technical standpoints. Additional review will be provided by the Planning Commission, Urban Transportation Commission, Downtown Commission, and Design Commission before recommendations are presented to the Austin City Council.

The Austin City Council will serve as the final decision-making authority. Led by Jill Amezcuca and the UDD, the team aims to present the updated Great Streets standards to Council for adoption in early 2027. Upon presentation, Council reviews the proposed amendments, approves updates to City policies and standards, and authorizes funding necessary for implementation. This multi-level review process ensures that the updated standards reflect both professional expertise and community priorities.

Interdepartmental Coordination

Implementing the Great Streets Program requires coordination across numerous City departments because streetscape improvements involve planning, transportation, utilities, infrastructure, development review, and long-term maintenance. Although the UDD leads the program, successful implementation depends on collaboration among departments with different responsibilities.

Key partners include TPW, which oversees street reconstruction, sidewalks, mobility, and public right-of-way improvements; the Development Services Department, which reviews private development for compliance with Great Streets standards; and the Economic Development Department, which contributes to downtown revitalization and public realm improvements on the maintenance side. Other essential partners include the City Arborist, who oversees street tree standards and urban green infrastructure; Austin Water, which coordinates utility infrastructure with streetscape improvements; and Austin Energy, which reviews electrical infrastructure, lighting, and utility conflicts.

Implementation also extends beyond City government. The DAA continues to play an important advocacy role by providing recommendations, participating in planning discussions, and promoting downtown improvements. Private developers are equally important, as many Great Streets improvements including expanding sidewalks, street trees, lighting, and pedestrian amenities are constructed through redevelopment projects.

Current Implementation

Since 2003, the Great Streets initiative has been implemented through three methods (City of Austin, n.d.) :

1. Private sector requirements tied to density incentives
2. Public-private cost-sharing partnerships
3. City-led infrastructure projects

Currently, the program has successfully transformed over 230 of the 306 targeted downtown block faces utilizing Great Streets standards.

Primary Methods of Implementation:

- Downtown Density Bonus Program (DDBP): Adhering to Great Streets standards is a mandatory "gatekeeper" requirement for the DDBP. Developers seeking additional height and density must implement these streetscape standards along their block faces, ensuring high-quality public space alongside increased development. As a result, most Great Streets projects are developed through the DDBP.

- **Great Streets Development Program (GSDP):** This incentive program reimburses private developers who voluntarily implement Great Streets standards as part of their projects. Developers complete a detailed requirements checklist and cover the upfront construction costs. Upon successful completion and review, they receive a reimbursement ranging from \$10 to \$18 per square foot.
- **Capital Improvement Projects (CIP):** For larger-scale public infrastructure initiatives, the City directly sponsors and funds street reconstruction. CIP projects integrate pedestrian-friendly streetscape standards at a district-wide level.

Great Streets Achievements and Impact

The Great Streets Initiative has been instrumental in transforming downtown Austin into a vibrant, walkable, and pedestrian-first urban core, completing 230 block faces to date.

Funding & Growth Indicators

- **Sustainable Funding:** Parking meter revenue generates approximately \$728,000 annually, serving as the core funding mechanism for ongoing Great Streets enhancements across CIP and the GSDP (City of Austin, n.d.)
- **Demographic Shift:** Since the early 2000s, downtown residential population has surged from 1,200 to 14,000, while the employee workforce has nearly doubled from 67,000 to 130,000.
- **Environmental & Safety Upgrades:** To combat urban heat island effects and improve pedestrian comfort, the program has added hundreds of native shade trees paired with modernized irrigation systems.
- **Streetscape Amenities:** Thousands of standardized features have been installed citywide, including pedestrian-scale lighting, public benches, recycling/trash receptacles, and bicycle racks.

Successful Capital Improvement Projects

- **2nd Street District (City of Austin, n.d.):**
 - **Development Impact:** Evolved from a tourist-heavy retail strip into a high-density, mixed-use commercial hub featuring over 175,000 sq. ft. of retail space, 600 residences, 250 hotel rooms, and 3,000 jobs.
 - **Community Return:** 40% of the City's property tax revenue generated within the district is redirected to the citywide Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

- Cesar Chavez Promenade (City of Austin, n.d.):
 - Infrastructure Transformation: Converted Cesar Chavez Street into a two-way boulevard flanked by a 32-foot-wide pedestrian promenade.
 - Lakefront Integration: Framed the banks of Lady Bird Lake with complete Great Streets amenities, including shade trees, lighting, seating, and bike racks.
- Brazos Street Corridor:
 - Roadway Reallocation: Transformed a 10-block car-centric Street into a multi-use zone by narrowing the roadway from 3–4 lanes to 2 lanes, allowing for 18-foot widened sidewalks.
 - Public Utility & Art Upgrades: Upgraded vital underground utilities, added shade trees, and integrated an interactive sound-art installation created by the Sodalitas Art Group.

Challenges and Enhancement

Although the Great Streets Program has significantly improved the quality of downtown Austin's public realm over the past two decades, Austin has experienced substantial population growth, increased downtown development, new transportation investments, and heightened concerns related to accessibility and climate resilience. As a result, the current Great Streets Update is focused not on replacing the original vision, but on strengthening its implementation and ensuring the program remains effective for future generations.

Prioritization and funding. Because financial resources are limited, the City must determine which improvements should be implemented first while balancing competing priorities across downtown. Rather than pursuing isolated streetscape projects, future investments should be guided by a comprehensive implementation strategy that identifies project costs, potential funding sources, phased construction schedules, and opportunities to coordinate with CIP and future bond programs.

Fragmented implementation of the Great Streets network. Much of the network has been implemented through the DDBP and the GSDP. While these programs successfully incentivize developers to build compliant streetscapes, implementation remains reactive and occurs incrementally as redevelopment projects move forward. As a result, streets contain discontinuous streetscapes where completed Great Streets blocks are interrupted by blocks that lack pedestrian amenities. We must have a unified master plan approach, not a piecemeal approach.

Several interviewees emphasized that the City should shift its focus from individual streetscape elements to **broader network planning and implementation**. The City should identify where improvements currently exist, where important gaps remain, and which corridors would have the greatest impact if completed. Developing a comprehensive map and database of existing Great Streets

infrastructure would provide valuable insight into strategic investment decisions and where to focus improvements.

Coordinating the Great Streets Program with other major public investments, such as Project Connect, the Downtown Density Bonus update, I-35, and downtown capital projects. Because many streets will already undergo reconstruction over the coming decades, integrating Great Streets improvements into these projects would reduce costs, minimize construction disruptions, and accelerate implementation. This coordinated approach allows the City to leverage ongoing infrastructure investments to advance the broader goals of the Great Streets Program.

Successful implementation also depends on continued collaboration among multiple City departments and strong leadership from the Planning Department, the Urban Design Division, and the City Manager's Office. Great Streets is led by UDD, with input from other departments, which are important partners. For example, TPW controls the entire public right-of-way while UDD only controls “back of curb.” An interdisciplinary approach will be essential as the program continues to evolve.

Greater flexibility in the Great Streets standards. While the original Great Streets standards established a consistent framework for downtown streetscape design, many streets face unique constraints, limited ROW, existing utilities, mature trees, and adjacent development conditions. Applying rigid dimensional requirements to every street may unintentionally limit opportunities to create high-quality pedestrian environments. Some interpret Great Streets as a strict checklist rather than a principle-based approach. This approach can discourage adaptable design solutions and shift the focus toward individual specifications rather than a broader vision of a connected, people-centered network. Instead, the updated standards should encourage context-sensitive design that upholds the core principles of Great Streets while allowing professional judgment to respond to site-specific conditions. Streets that successfully support walkability, continuity, accessibility, and an active public realm should still be Great Streets, even when they cannot meet every prescribed dimensional standard.

Coordinated and sustainable long-term maintenance strategy for the Great Streets Program. Long-term success of Great Streets depends on consistent maintenance that keeps public spaces clean, safe, attractive, and welcoming for all users. However, maintenance responsibilities are not always clearly defined, creating uncertainty over whether the City, adjacent property owners, or building managers are responsible for maintaining specific streetscape elements. Clarifying these responsibilities and communicating them through a standardized maintenance framework would help solve the problem and preserve the character of downtown streets. Also, the City should establish a comprehensive long-term strategy to improve coordination among City departments and utility providers, and prioritize proactive maintenance of streetscape infrastructure.

CAG meetings have discussed an additional maintenance challenge with street trees. Although planting street trees is straightforward, ensuring their long-term health is considerably more challenging (City of Austin, 2025). Many trees experience poor soil conditions and excessive heat, resulting in declining health or trees dying. Existing policy and utility requirements, particularly with Austin Energy, limit where trees can be planted, creating barriers in expanding the tree canopy. The Great Streets Update would benefit from incorporating the work of the City’s Green Infrastructure Working Group, which has been establishing updated guidelines on street tree planting and maintenance to maximize tree health and minimize utility conflicts.

Expand the boundaries of Great Streets. Great Streets is such a good program that it is a shame to keep it within the Downtown boundaries. Some express that the current program aligns with other city projects and wish for the Great Streets standard to be applied across the Austin area, not just downtown.

Overall, the current update represents an opportunity to strengthen the Great Streets Program. By improving project prioritization, closing gaps in the network, coordinating implementation with major infrastructure investments, and adopting more flexible design standards, the City can continue building upon the original vision of creating a connected, vibrant, and pedestrian-oriented downtown.

Future Opportunities and Next Steps

As the Great Streets Update progresses, the City of Austin will continue making progress on its public engagement efforts before updates are finalized. The second half of the community outreach phase includes a fifth CAG meeting, scheduled for September 2026, which will focus on refining the proposed performance measures and design standards for the updated Great Streets Program. In August 2026, the third TAG meeting will bring together City staff and technical experts to review streetscape elements such as benches, bicycle racks, trash and recycling receptacles, and other design details to ensure they are practical, maintainable, and consistent with city internal standards.

Following these technical and advisory reviews, the Urban Design Division will host a final public open house to present the proposed recommendations before the draft plan moves into the formal review process. The updated Great Streets standards will then be presented to several City boards and commissions for public discussion and recommendations in early 2027. Following these reviews, the final recommendations are expected to be presented to the Austin City Council for consideration and adoption.

Conclusion

Streets are vital public spaces for urban life, as “Streets Are for People.” The Great Streets Program transformed downtown Austin by shifting from a car-centric 75/25 distribution to a balanced 55/45 allocation, revitalizing Austin’s urban core. The success of projects such as the 2nd Street Retail District and the Cesar Chavez Promenade demonstrates how thoughtful streetscape design can provide walkability, support economic development, encourage high-density residential growth, and create vibrant public spaces.

Since its adoption in 2001, the Great Streets Master Plan has continued to shape downtown Austin. While challenges remain, the ongoing Great Streets Update presents an opportunity to strengthen the program while preserving its original vision. By addressing these implementation challenges and building upon past successes, Austin can continue to grow a connected, people-centered streetscape network that supports the city's growth and enhances the quality of life for decades to come.

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