

Letter

Re: Calling for a safer, more people-oriented vision for 51st Street between Cameron Road and Berkman Drive

Dear Council Member Qadri and Mayor Pro Tem Vela, Mayor Watson, City of Austin Council Members, and Assistant City Managers Rogers and Johnson,

We are a coalition of neighborhood associations, advocacy organizations, local businesses, and residents writing to support a safe, vibrant, and economically productive vision for 51st Street between Cameron Road and Berkman Drive.

We appreciate TPW staff's work on this long-awaited project and we share the goal of a 51st Street that serves the community well for generations. At the same time, the current concept would maintain 51st Street's four-lane arterial configuration, designed primarily to move vehicles at the expense of safety, walkability, and economic vitality. **We urge Council to work with staff to present the community with an alternative concept featuring one travel lane in each direction¹ — as already exists on 51st east of Berkman Drive and west of I-35 — along with:**

- Single-lane roundabouts at major intersections²
- Shaded protected bicycle lanes wide enough to accommodate a range of micromobility devices
- Street trees on the north side of 51st Street
- Driveway consolidations wherever feasible
- Comfortable, shaded public seating
- A pedestrian hybrid beacon at Aldrich Street³

The current concept for 51st is fundamentally the same as plans developed in 2014. Since then, Austin has adopted the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan and Vision Zero; our understanding of street design has evolved; and communities increasingly expect streets to promote safety, walking, bicycling, thriving local businesses, and public life, not simply maximize vehicle throughput. In light of these significant developments, it is therefore crucial to revisit the plans for 51st to reflect current needs and standards.

While we understand the desire to move this long-delayed project forward, taking additional time to develop a design that reflects today's priorities will produce benefits for decades. As Austin continues transforming dangerous multilane arterials into safer, more multimodal, and more vibrant boulevards, 51st Street presents an excellent opportunity to set a new standard for future corridor projects across the city.

Thank you for your time, leadership, and consideration in this important matter.

Sincerely,

[List entities and representatives below]

Adam Greenfield, Executive Director, Safe Streets Austin

¹ This alternative would avoid relocating the existing street trees on the south side, a practice that carries a significant risk of failure.

² Roundabouts improve safety, maintain traffic flow, and typically cost less to install and maintain than signalized intersections.

³ We also support existing plans for a PHB at Tilley Street.

Notes

51st St project feedback letter

[City of Austin project page](#)

[Schematics](#)

[Outreach spreadsheet](#)

6/13/26 meeting notes

- Do it right, not fast
- Number of lanes (East 51st is one lane west of Berkman and east of IH-35)
- Smaller median (reduction in lanes) and don't move trees?
- AADT: 28,687 (2018)
- Roundabouts
- Highway Safety Manual says four lane roads are bad (see CMF Clearinghouse website (screenshot below of results for "lane conversion") [CMF Clearinghouse](#))
- Left turn lanes block view of oncoming traffic ([good image of why this is problematic](#) [pasted below](#))
- Design should incorporate 50:50 modeshare (space for golf carts, low speed vehicles, e-trikes). The Austin Strategic Mobility Plan on page 136 states to integrate low speed electric vehicles. I've pasted below a cross section from [this multimodal plan](#) in Coachella Valley
- Highlight process issues - this is based on a 2014 vision plan, last public input in 2018.
- Transplanting trees - will they survive? Average ~50%. Also adds significant cost to project for construction and operations and maintenance. The existing trees are well established. Reduce to 1-lane in each direction and no need to transplant all those trees.
- 2018 plans were also at 90%, we can restart this process, YES! They will push back that drainage will need to be redone BUT with East 51st Street reduced to 1 travel lane in each direction that will reduce the impervious cover and the peak flow demand on the drainage system.
- There are no planned pedestrian refuges at Berkman (at all the intersections!)
- Costs: Construction, O&M, crashes
- Design is not in alignment with Austin City Council approved directives: Vision Zero, Safe Systems Approach, Austin Strategic Mobility Plan.
- 51st is on Austin's High Injury Network
- Northside bike and pedestrian facility is not shown as shaded. Reduce East 51st Street to 1 vehicle travel lane in each direction; opens up opportunities to add AE-friendly trees on the north side away from the electric power pole lines.
- The Arts in Public Places (AIPP) is problematic too: galvanized steel benches with sharp edges intended for people to sit on. Us 1980s kids that slid down metal slides know what that means! The proposed art needs to be changed too to benches that are friendly to sit on; the current design is very unfriendly to pedestrians wanting a place to rest.
- A four lane arterial is

- Inherently offputting to people walking and bicycling, regardless of the presence of sidewalks and protected bike lanes
- A poor economic generator, bad for business

▼ Category: Roadway (45)

▼ Subcategory: Number of lanes (45)

▼ Countermeasure: Converting four-lane roadways to three-lane roadways with center turn lane (road diet)

Compare	CMF	CRF(%)	Quality	Crash Type	Crash Severity	Area Type	Reference	Comments
☐	0.53	47	★★★★★	All	All	Urban and suburban	PERSAUD ET. AL, 2010	When this CMF was initially en... [READ MORE]
☐	0.748	25.2	★★★★★	All	All	Urban	PAWLOVICH ET AL., 2006	CMF calculation is for reducti...[READ MORE]
☐	0.812	18.8	★★★★★	All	All	Urban	PAWLOVICH ET AL., 2006	CMF calculation is for reducti...[READ MORE]

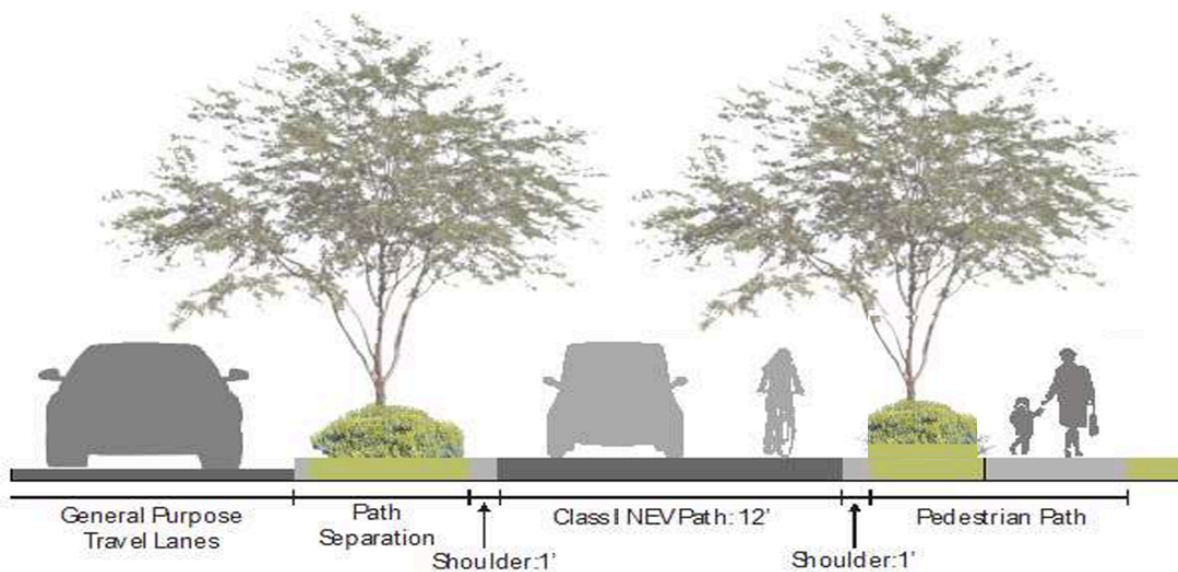
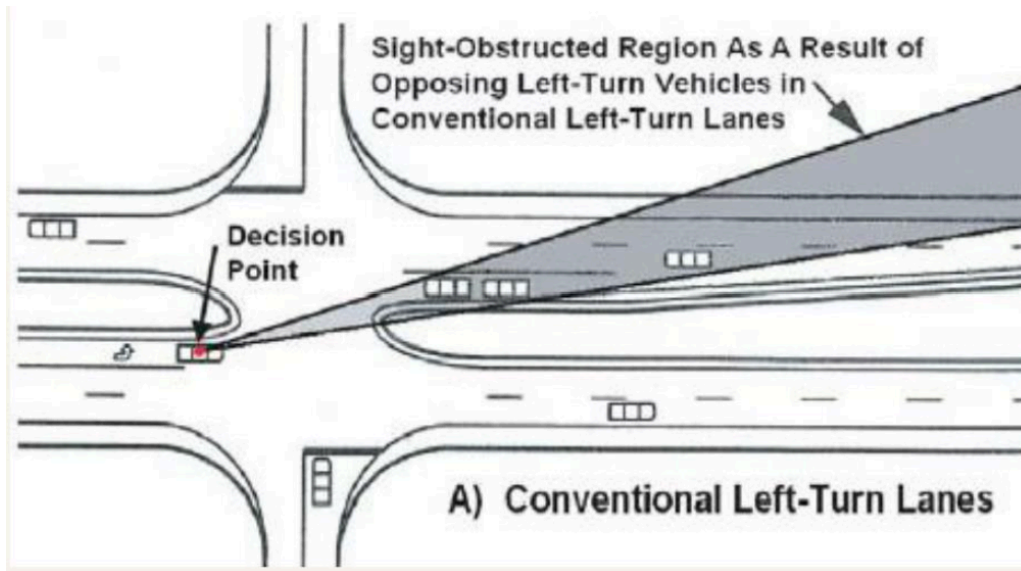
► Countermeasure: Five to six lane conversion

► Countermeasure: Four to five lane conversion

► Countermeasure: Install TWLTL (two-way left turn lane) on four lane road

▼ Countermeasure: Road diet (Convert 4-lane undivided road to 2-lanes plus turning lane)

Compare	CMF	CRF(%)	Quality	Crash Type	Crash Severity	Area Type	Reference	Comments
☐	0.613	38.7	★★★★★	Non-intersection	All	Urban	SUN AND RAHMAN, 2019	Safety performance function fo... [READ MORE]



TPW's current proposed design is substantially the same as plans from 2012 and should be revised for the following reasons:

- The plans predate the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan, its mode shift goal of 50% non-drive alone commutes by 2039, and Vision Zero and should be revised to align with such plans and goals
- Austin City Council is comprised of entirely different members and community wants and needs around transportation have changed significantly
- Best practices around transportation and street design have advanced considerably

- Four lane roadways are increasingly considered outdated designs that encourage high speeds and harm vibrancy, walkability, and local businesses
- Streets are being considered more holistically than a singular focus on traffic volumes, incorporating consideration of foot traffic levels, healthy local businesses, and so on
- Planners now better understand induced/reduced demand and the benefits of slow traffic

In our various discussions with staff and contractors on this project we were informed that this design was intended to fulfill the vision set out in 2012 for 51st. We would note that there has been significant drift from that initial vision in the 14 years since proposed, but also, and more importantly, that what was considered excellent street design then and now has also significantly changed. And we have to ask ourselves, as a community, and a city, whether it makes sense to stick to a design that today would be considered a car oriented corridor instead of a Main Street, where Mueller and Windsor Park come to meet - it's the difference between creating connections vs creating divisions.

Rather than proceeding with the proposed four-lane configuration, we call upon Council to work with City staff on an alternate configuration that includes no more than one general purpose vehicle lane in each direction and raised or concrete-protected bicycle lanes and separate low speed vehicle lanes in both directions. We note that the traffic counts today on 51st fall well under the requirement for consideration in [road diets] and we would also note the great success the city recently had on Barton Springs Road despite many concerns expressed in advance of any such consideration. East 51st Street is already one vehicle lane in each direction west of IH-35 and east of Berkman Drive. Springdale Road in East Austin, including south of East 51st Street, has also been converted to one lane in each direction.

The elimination of two lanes of traffic would allow for or be considered with:

- A serious consideration of 1-lane roundabouts at major street intersections.
- Transit signal prioritization and bus queue jumps of 100-300 feet at intersections (suggest leaving out since advocating for roundabouts)
- Avoiding relocating trees
- Planting trees on the north side of 51st Street (possible by reducing to one travel lane in each direction; with 4 lanes, the overhead electric utilities prevent tree plantings)
- Driveway consolidations wherever possible
- Benches to look inviting and not be primarily made of metal or feature sharp edges
- Shorter pedestrian crossings instead of forcing pedestrians to cross 5 traffic lanes with no real protection. (move this as a bullet to support the request for 1-lane roundabouts since would not have 5 traffic lanes with 1 lane roundabouts)

Finally, we think all major investments in road reconstruction going forward must comply with the ASMP goals adopted in 2014 (updated in 2024, insert relevant quotes from plan, see notes). As members of the community, as advocates for safe streets, and quality public space, we understand this has been a project a long time in waiting. We are willing to wait a bit more to get it right.

2014 is too long ago - Council and public have changed a lot since then, ASMP is post-2014

It's okay to take another six months for a project that will last for decades

If we were designing 51st St from scratch today, we would likely not design 4 lanes

If the intent is to make this portion of East 51st Street more of a shared boulevard between the Mueller and Windsor Park neighborhoods that is safer and community-oriented, then it should not emphasize the private automobile.