

OUR FUTURE 35 - AUSTIN'S CAP AND STITCH PROGRAM

Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study

1. OVERVIEW

The City of Austin (lead applicant) and the Downtown Austin Alliance (partner), along with our supporters and other partners are pleased to submit the **Our Future 35: Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** to the USDOT's Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program as a candidate for planning grant funding. This planning study will evaluate critical transportation, public health, equitable development, and environmental justice outcomes needed to move the Austin community's vision for [Our Future 35](#) forward. Both the proposed planning study and the broader Our Future 35 program align with the Administration's goal to restore community connectivity by studying the feasibility and impact of removing, retrofitting, or mitigating transportation infrastructure that originally created barriers to economic, cultural, and social opportunities.

1.1 A Community Severed: The History of I-35 in Austin

The legacy of I-35 in Austin is synonymous with Austin's history of displacement, segregation, and exclusionary zoning. Since 1962, I-35 has been a (if not the) primary driver of segregation and disparity. It is a concrete divide that is poorly suited to the community and presents a major roadblock to access, mobility, and economic opportunity. Just as importantly, I-35 is a physical barrier that reinforces and exacerbates the zoning, redlining, and other discriminatory policies that segregated low-income and minority communities, separated them from access to opportunity, and imposed disproportionate environmental impacts on them.

The neighborhoods adjacent to I-35 have historically been home to the largest concentrations of Black and Mexican-



1928 East Avenue / La Calle Ancha ("The Wide Street"). I-35, constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, was built atop the East Avenue right-of-way, transforming a surface street into an elevated highway and dividing East and West Austin. IMAGE CREDIT: (C) Austin History Center // Austin Public Library #560

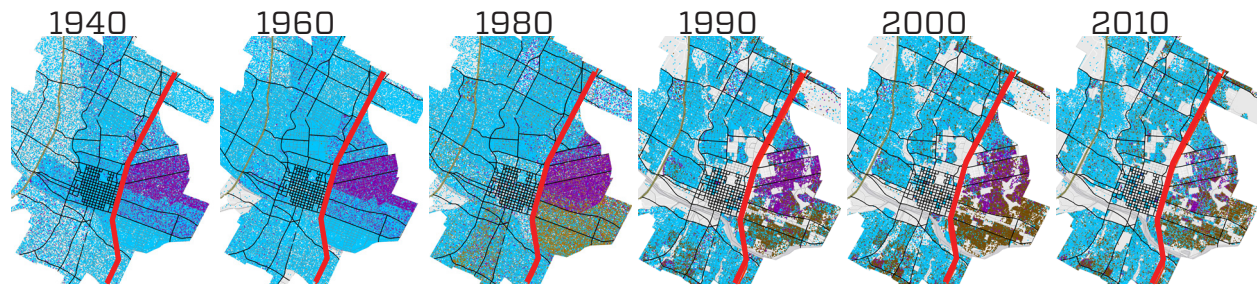


1947 Samuel Huston College summer convocation on East Avenue, using this public space for community purposes. IMAGE CREDIT: (C) Austin History Center // Austin Public Library

Americans, due in large part to past racist city planning policies that segregated communities of color to East Austin. The area, while rapidly changing, "remains a central point – the heartbeat – for Black and Hispanic residents across the city."¹

East Avenue, where I-35 stands today, was once a vibrant gathering place—a boulevard known for its park-like tree-lined medians that were once used for family picnics, conversations,

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1940 - 2010 SEGREGATION OF BLACKS AND HISPANICS IN EAST AUSTIN: ● BLACK // ● HISPANIC // ● WHITE // I-35/East Avenue
CREDIT: Eliot M. Tretter // UT Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis // Austin Restricted [...] The Making of a Segregated City

musical performances, sports, and even Tillotson College convocations. However, in 1928, East Avenue began its trajectory toward becoming a street that symbolizes segregation.

Austin’s 1928 City Plan included a zoning strategy to isolate minorities and create a “Negro District” on the east side of East Avenue, making this area the only part of the city where Black Americans could access schools and other public services² (see figure above). Exacerbating this segregation, over 90% of industrial zoning was intentionally placed here.³ In 1935, the federal government sanctioned this local segregationist policy by designating this portion of East Austin as a “redline” district where the Federal Home Owners Loan Corporation would not provide mortgages, thereby denying Austin’s “Negro District” from one of the nation’s greatest wealth-building opportunities.⁴

The legalized segregation by the 1928 Master Plan evolved into the effective and real segregation of Blacks and Hispanics in East Austin.⁵ The construction of the I-35 freeway in the place of East Avenue in the 1950s and 1960s subsequently transformed the invisible redline of Austin’s 1928 plan into a true physical barrier. The combination of redlining practices with the construction of the highway resulted in displaced homes and businesses and decimated public spaces. Raised concrete berms created walls and limited cross-street connections in over 30 locations between Ladybird Lake and Airport Blvd. Parks and destinations once walkable now require

traversing the highway, and new elevated freeway decks cut off Black and Brown communities from the economic engine that is downtown, disrupting the social cohesion of Austin’s neighborhoods and community spaces.

For example, the East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood just north of Ladybird Lake was once a single, connected neighborhood that straddled East Avenue. The construction of I-35 effectively cut off Rainey Street, which lies just west of the freeway, from the remainder of the neighborhood, isolating its residents from community services and former neighbors (see image below). The City subsequently rezoned Rainey Street for high-density development, completing the transition of this now isolated remnant from a largely Mexican-American neighborhood into a downtown nightlife destination.

A 2014 PBS feature, [Austin Revealed](#), described Austin as a “tale of two cities” where “the magical line” is I-35.⁶ And a 2015 study identified Austin as one of the



HIGHWAY PHYSICALLY DIVIDING COMMUNITY CIRCA 1960
CREDIT: (C) Austin History Center // Austin Public Library

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most economically segregated cities in the nation.⁷ While inner East Austin has struggled with gentrification and displacement in recent decades, the area remains the cultural and historic center of Austin’s Black and Mexican-American communities, and I-35’s presence remains a distinct physical, racial, and socioeconomic barrier.

1.2 Born From Community: Austin’s Our Future 35 Program

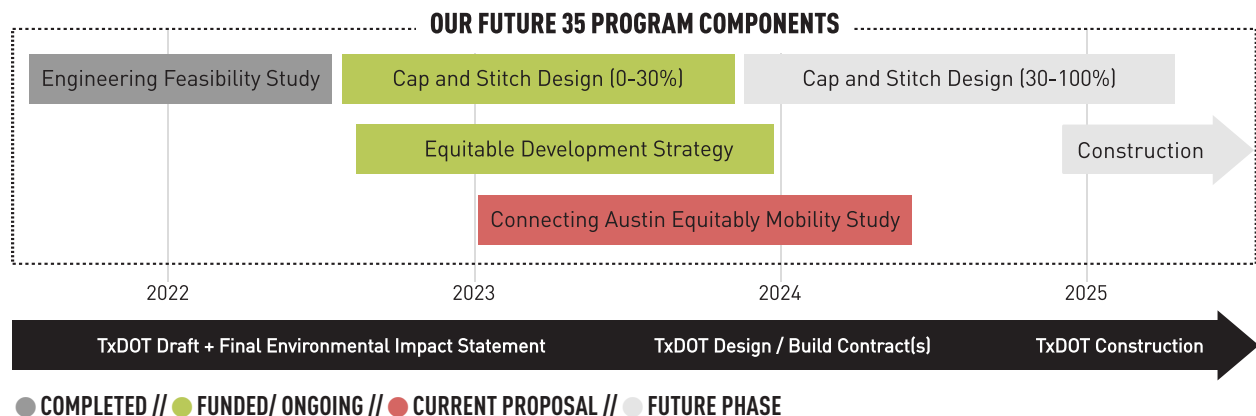
Our Future 35 is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-stitch our community and create community benefits for Austin residents who have been harmed by past infrastructure and policy decisions. With TxDOT’s proposal to widen and lower portions of I-35 through central Austin, the City has an opportunity to leverage the work planned by TxDOT to re-connect East and West Austin through new “caps” and “stitches” that can assist in making important strides toward unifying and mending the divide created by the original construction of I-35 and replacing it with amenities that celebrate and connect all Austinites.

In 2020, the Downtown Austin Alliance led an [Urban Land Institute National Advisory Services panel roadmap](#) for how to create a series of widened crossings and highway caps. Following the ULI study, the Downtown Austin Alliance started a [series](#)

[of community conversations](#) called Our Future 35 in partnership with a local radio station, KAZI. These discussions delved further into the legacy of segregationist policies in Austin, reflected on the impact I-35 has had on people, and envisioned what new spaces and connections over the highway could provide for the community

Following the engagement series, the Downtown Austin Alliance convened a community-based Scoping Working Group representing over 50 organizations in Austin directly impacted by past and present freeway construction efforts (see Appendix B). The Scoping Working Group initiated several calls to action during the early stages of the NEPA process to ensure that the reconstruction of I-35 addresses the highway’s legacy of segregation and creates opportunities for BIPOC residents to share in the benefits of the freeway project.

Now, the City of Austin is championing the next phase of this once-in-a-generation effort to create new caps and stitches over the freeway. Austin’s Our Future 35 Program grew from this grassroots advocacy into what it is today—a set of intentional, interrelated projects co-created with Austinites and TxDOT to ensure that the community’s vision is realized through implementable design, engineering, and policy actions.



The Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study will be a critical component of the broader Our Future 35 program. Successfully reconnecting with new caps and stitches will require a deep understanding of the surrounding transportation and cultural networks that are bifurcated by the freeway.



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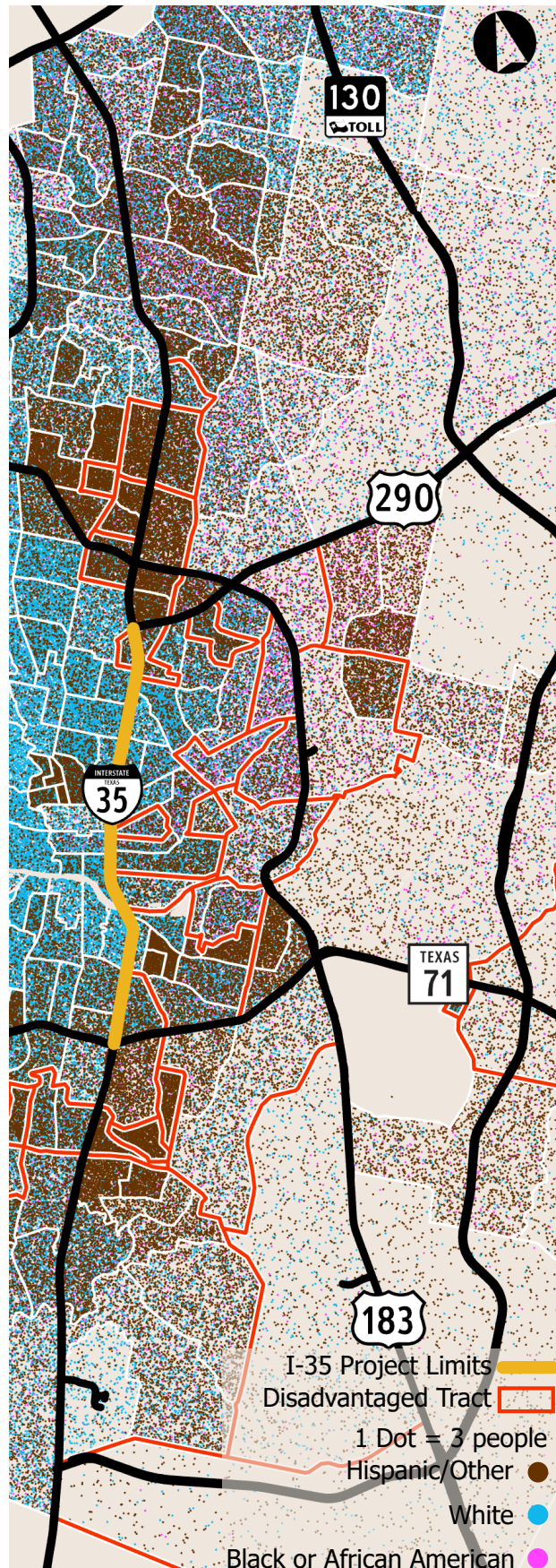
2. PROJECT LOCATION

This project concerns the 8 miles of I-35 corridor from US 290 (north) to SH 71 (south). What makes Austin's Our Future 35 program monumental is its context. I-35 is critically important to Austin and the surrounding region. It serves as a central transportation spine, spanning the iconic Lady Bird Lake and providing access to commercial centers including downtown, the Texas State Capitol Complex, the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) campus, Huston-Tillotson University campus, Dell Medical Campus, as well as residential neighborhoods across the eastern and northern sections of the city. Each day, I-35 serves more than 200,000 vehicles (70 percent local and 30 percent through traffic).

Today, there is a wealth and access-to-opportunity gap between East and West Austin. Most of the city's low-income residents are located east of I-35 where lower household incomes, education attainment, demographic diversity and access to high-paying jobs are coupled with higher residential and transportation cost burdens in comparison to those experienced on the west side of I-35 (see graphs on the following page).

Specifically, between SH 71/Ben White Blvd and US 290, there are five East Austin census tracts identified as "disadvantaged" by the EPA Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool. Four of these disadvantaged census tracts are home to residents suffering from a sustainable housing cost burden (census tracts where a vast majority of households are low-income and spend more than 30% of their income on housing). Three of these census tracts are home to low-income residents who also lack higher educational attainment, and/or are linguistically isolated.

Study project limits and census tracts by race. Tracts identified as disadvantaged by USDOT are illustrated with red boundaries.

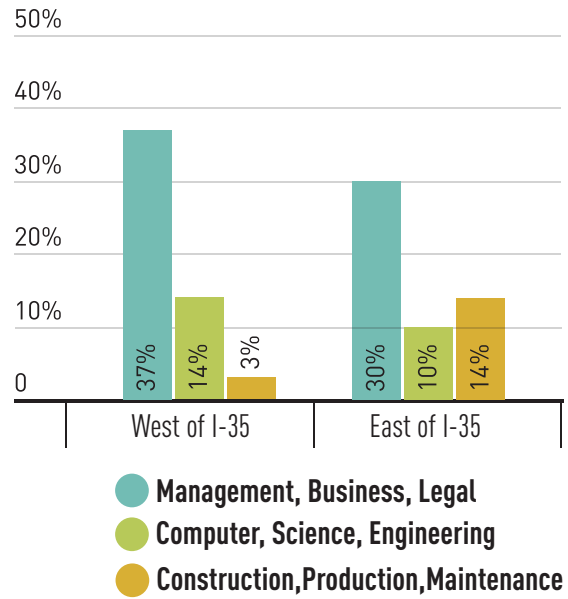


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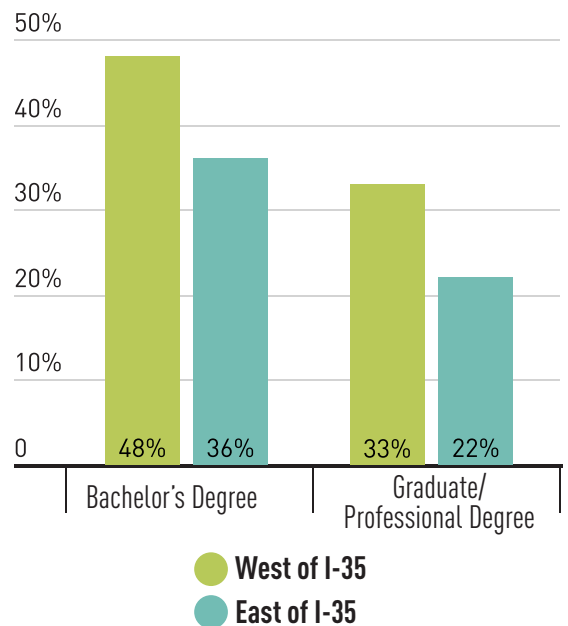
The disparities between East and West Austin extend beyond economic outcomes. Research from our partners at UT-Austin shows that environmental justice outcomes also vary widely depending upon which side of I-35 one resides. For example, there is a stark difference between heat island impacts east and west of the freeway. Furthermore, there is a nearly twenty-year difference in [life expectancy](#) between residents of East and West Austin.⁸

Access to critical health care in neighborhoods with greater Black and Mexican-American populations, including East Austin, is a potential factor contributing to inequitable health outcomes. Research from UT-Austin shows that EMS response is more delayed in these neighborhoods than in predominantly white neighborhoods. Specifically, there are higher clustering patterns of EMS traffic in East Austin, and being in a neighborhood with greater Black and Mexican-American populations is likely to exacerbate traffic delay and EMS response time.⁹

Despite ongoing struggles with gentrification and displacement in inner East Austin, neighborhoods east of I-35 are still home to a large portion of the City’s Black and Mexican-American community (see map on page 4). This area is also home to a significant number of businesses, cultural, educational and public institutions, as well as churches that represent the historic Black and Mexican-American community. The I-35 corridor is in the vicinity of Six Square: Austin’s Black Cultural District, the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, and the Emma Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center.



2022 Employment Breakdown by Job Type, East vs. West of I-35 (ESRI Business Analyst)



2022 Educational Attainment, East vs. West of I-35 (ESRI Business Analyst)



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3. RESPONSE TO MERIT CRITERIA

3.1 Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement

The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will support and complement the work of the recently initiated Our Future 35 Equitable Development Strategy, which will identify affordable housing, anti-displacement and business support strategies for neighborhoods surrounding new freeway caps. To support this effort the **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will identify transportation equity-focused action items for partners and departments across the City. This will ensure that Our Future 35 provides neighborhood mobility improvements, including:

- Identifying transportation needs in surrounding neighborhoods to provide safe, equitable, multimodal access to, across, and from new caps and stitches and surrounding cultural destinations.
- Providing safe, equitable access to transit.
- Maximizing opportunities for equitable transit-oriented-development (E-TOD) on and adjacent to the new caps and stitches.

The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will apply the City's new E-TOD Policy Toolkit and will identify policy recommendations and action items that align with the City's E-TOD goals:

- Enable all residents to benefit from safe, sustainable, and accessible transportation.
- Help to close racial health and wealth gaps.
- Preserve and increase housing opportunities that are affordable and attainable.
- Expand access to high-quality jobs and career opportunities.
- Support health neighborhoods that meet daily needs.
- Sustain Austin's diverse cultural heritage and small businesses.

The funding provided by this grant will ensure that new freeway caps connect seamlessly to surrounding cultural and transportation networks. The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will include the following six study elements:

- 1. Equitable Multimodal Mobility** – Identify policy and infrastructure investments needed to provide equitable multimodal mobility options (including evaluating vehicular, transit, bike, pedestrian, recreational, and emergency networks) to neighborhoods surrounding I-35 and unlock access for households cut off from safe pedestrian access to transit, schools, employment centers, healthcare, and other vital destinations on the west side of I-35 by the freeway. Work alongside the Our Future 35 Equitable Development Strategy to identify ways in which multimodal mobility connections can best support affordable housing, local businesses, cultural centers, and City and social services.
- 2. Access to Transit** – Leverage investments provided by Project Connect¹⁰, a major effort to expand and improve Austin's transportation network (including new light rail lines and bus rapid transit) and better understand transit needs and priorities in East Austin and across the new destinations and amenities created by the caps and stitches.
- 3. Equitable TOD** – Evaluate opportunities and make recommendations for equitable transit-oriented-development (E-TOD) on and adjacent to the new caps and stitches, leveraging the City's ongoing work to develop policy toolkits and zoning code amendments to foster equitable TOD. This will include providing recommendations on how to carry forward ongoing "equitable development" concepts that will help address housing, employment, and cultural development needs for surrounding residents.

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- 4. Celebrating Community: Placemaking and Wayfinding –** Create a placemaking and wayfinding plan to interpret and promote the multi-cultural heritage of the community that surrounds I-35. This effort will also connect to existing wayfinding plans in the vicinity, such as the Mexican American Heritage Corridor,¹¹ the Tourism and Heritage Wayfinding effort (underway), and the Downtown Austin Wayfinding Program (underway). Through strategies such as interpretive signage, wayfinding, public art, feature naming, and programming, community history will be shared and celebrated thereby creating an authentic and inclusive public space.
- 5. Environmental Justice and Health-** Evaluate the environmental justice impacts and associated health indicators of existing and proposed transportation infrastructure on residents and evaluate how new caps and stitches and associated investments can maximize benefit, including improved air quality, increased shade, easy access to transportation options, and connectivity to healthy food options. The program team will partner with faculty and researchers from UT-Austin (located along the I-35 corridor) to leverage local academic expertise in urban climatology and air quality metrics and mitigations.
- 6. Community Engagement and Partnership -** Because the City is co-creating with community members, the Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study will likewise involve meaningful engagement with the community through a series of open houses, conversations, focus groups, and steering group meetings. The Study will leverage existing, in-place community engagement structures, including the Our Future 35 Community Steering Committee.

The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will also develop a placemaking plan that celebrates the cultural heritage of the communities surrounding the I-35 corridor, prioritizing untold stories. Community advocates have already identified the importance of acknowledging the past and addressing the pain caused by I-35's construction. To this end, the Study will include working with local cultural leaders, organizations, community artists, and the City's cultural arts staff to integrate healing-centered cultural strategies early and throughout the planning process. Such strategies will

- bring people together and engage residents in new ways, particularly those who may not participate in more traditional planning meetings;
- center residents' past and current lived experiences, helping to name and acknowledge past harm while documenting community stories that can be shared and celebrated; and
- help promote community ownership and stewardship of the future public gathering spaces created through this process so that they are embraced, frequently utilized, and cared for.

The Study will evaluate transportation-related health and environmental justice concerns and recommend mitigation for impacted neighborhoods, including but not limited to identifying air quality and heat island impacts and mitigations, providing easy access to safe and active transportation options, and enhancing connectivity to healthy food options. The City will partner with UT-Austin faculty from the Department of Geological Sciences and the School of Engineering to identify measures for transportation-related environmental justice inequities, collect baseline data, identify mitigation measures, and conduct if/then scenario modelling. These efforts will be conducted with partnership and input from community institutions.

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STUDY ELEMENTS (Described in more detail on the following pages)	Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement	Mobility and Community Connectivity	Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships	Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity
Equitable Mobility	●	●	●	●
Access to Transit	●	●	●	●
Equitable TOD	●	●	●	●
Placemaking and Wayfinding	●	●	●	
Environmental Justice	●	●	●	●
Community Engagement	●		●	●

Not only does Our Future 35 co-create outcomes, it co-creates the process.

The Our Future 35 Program is dedicated to co-creating with community under the framework of previously established agreements and collaborating with existing coalitions. The Scoping Working Group, originally formed in 2020 from grassroots activism, has been reborn as the Our Future 35 Community Steering Committee. The committee will oversee and co-create the study’s identified outcomes, the project’s vision and goals, and the analysis and prioritization of investments. Additionally, the Our Future 35 Community Steering Committee will be charged with helping to shape the Study’s community engagement efforts and ensure the Study outputs accurately reflect community feedback received via in-person and digital open houses, focus groups, and stakeholder conversations. The City and its partners will specifically seek to reach hard-to-access community members, such as those who have been pushed further out from the I-35 corridor due to gentrification.

3.2 MOBILITY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

The construction of I-35 in the 1960’s resulted in communities that were physically cut-off from services and amenities. Raised concrete berms created walls and limited cross-street connections. The funding provided by this grant will ensure that new infrastructure over

I-35 reconnects seamlessly to surrounding cultural and transportation networks.

This Study will identify policy and infrastructure investments needed to provide equitable mobility options to, from, and between new freeway caps and the neighborhoods surrounding I-35. Additionally it seeks to unlock access for people in an historically underserved area to safely access transit, schools, employment centers, and other vital destinations. This effort will include connecting new caps and stitches to surrounding cultural and open space amenities on both sides of the highway, including the Mexican American Cultural Center, the African American Heritage Center, Waterloo Greenway, Ladybird Lake Trail, and Downtown, relinking neighborhoods previously severed.

The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will evaluate improvements on and around the new freeway caps to ensure that Our Future 35 provides equitable transit access, maximizes opportunities for increased transit service and ridership, and meets transit network speed and reliability needs. The Study will ensure that new cap and stitch infrastructure supports the success of Project Connect¹⁰ transit investments in the vicinity, and vice versa.

Study recommendations for multimodal access improvements for new caps and stitches will be integrated into schematic designs being developed in parallel to this study.

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3.3 COMMUNITY-BASED STEWARDSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND PARTNERSHIPS

Community is more than a stakeholder in this effort - Community is a partner.

The I-35 Scoping Working Group formed in 2020 represented over [50 organizations](#) directly impacted by past and present freeway construction efforts. The Scoping Working Group has been reborn as the Our Future 35 Community Steering Committee and will continue to oversee and co-create project and program studies and designs, including the **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study**.

The Our Future 35 Program is advancing an Equitable Development Strategy, which is being developed in partnership with the Austin Economic Development Corporation. The Equitable Development Strategy will result in an action plan for key program partners and community stakeholders to help ensure that new civic amenities create positive benefits for the surrounding community. The Equitable Development Strategy will focus specifically on community needs in regard to housing, anti-displacement, community development, small business support and incubation, and workforce development. That effort will entail working closely with community stakeholders and implementors already at the table via the Stakeholder Working Group/Our Future 35 Community Steering Committee.

The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will work alongside the Equitable Development Strategy by developing an action plan for stakeholders and implementors to move the community's prioritized needs forward in regard to equitable mobility improvements, as well as environmental justice and public health-related mitigations.

The City of Austin is lead applicant on this proposal and is pleased to partner with the Downtown Austin Alliance. The Downtown Austin Alliance has played a key role as the initial convener of community leaders and stakeholder organizations. The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** includes partnering with Capital Metro to engage in the Study's transit-and [equitable TOD-related elements](#) as well as coordination with Project Connect.¹⁰

Additionally, the program is partnering with faculty and researchers at UT-Austin, located within the project corridor. Academic partners at UT-Austin will assist with the Study's environmental justice scope of work, evaluating transportation-related health and environmental justice concerns and recommended mitigation for impacted neighborhoods. The program will also be pursuing a new research partnership with Huston-Tillotson University, a locally serving Historically Black University within the project corridor, that maintains important connections to community members most impacted by this body of work.

Finally, it is because TxDOT is planning to reconstruct I-35 between US 290 East and SH 71/Ben White Boulevard as part of the I-35 Capital Express Central Project, that the City and community partners are presented with this generational opportunity to reconnect the community over the newly lowered freeway. Guiding the program and Study timeline is the need to coordinate with TxDOT's design and construction timeline for the CapEx Central freeway project. Because TxDOT will construct new City-funded structures in conjunction with freeway construction in 2025, Our Future 35 will develop engineering and design plans to be integrated into TxDOT's construction process and timeline. This critical planning study will help position the City for construction readiness.

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3.4 EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SHARED PROSPERITY

The Equitable Development Strategy will explore “Right to Return” housing policies, value capture strategies for community benefit, affordable housing development and land banking opportunities, and small business incubation. The **Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study** will support the Our Future 35 Equitable Development Strategy by identifying mobility-related actions needed to provide equitable multi-modal connections to and between new and existing neighborhood cultural and open space amenities.

The Study will also identify opportunities for equitable transit-oriented development along the study area corridor, feeding

recommended action items directly into the Equitable Development Strategy. This will include identifying opportunities to apply the new City E-TOD policy toolkit in the project vicinity and identifying any recommended E-TOD required zoning changes.



Project partners from the City of Austin, Downtown Austin Alliance, and TxDOT visited Dallas to learn from local Cap / Stitch Projects (APRIL 2022)
CREDIT: (C) Downtown Austin Alliance

PROJECT PARTNERS	Role in Connecting Austin Equitably Mobility Study	Documented Agreements
City of Austin (COA) (Lead Applicant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding recipient and administrator. 	See below
Downtown Austin Alliance (Partner)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public involvement coordination. 	Documented agreement pending – anticipated execution December, 2022
Texas Department of Transportation (Facility Owner)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding and implementation of NEPA environmental review for new City-funded caps and stitches (outside of grant study). Integrating construction of new City-funded caps and stitches into overall design/build contract for freeway construction in late 2025 (outside of grant study). 	Memorandum of Understanding – Anticipated Execution February, 2023 (TxDOT/COA)
Capital Metro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify E-TOD opportunities to support equitable development strategy. Evaluate transit planning needs serving new caps/stitches and service improvements to provide equitable access and provide first/last mile connections. Evaluate how Project Connect transit investments interact with new caps and stitches. 	Routine Interagency collaboration and partnering; Does not require formal agreement.
University of Texas at Austin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify measures for transportation-related environmental justice inequities, conduct scenario modelling, and collect baseline data 	Master Interlocal Agreement No. UTA19-000382 between the City of Austin and UT-Austin
Huston-Tillotson University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In collaboration with Community, identify measures and indicators for equitable outcomes; collect baseline data 	City of Austin and Downtown Austin Alliance are currently pursuing a partnership with Huston-Tillotson University to collaborate formally on this study. Agreement anticipated - pending.