Enhancing Downtown Mobility and Safety

A Plan to Create a Downtown Bicycle Zone

March 14, 2008

Introduction

With an influx of several dozen new condominium, apartment and other "infill" projects underway, city planners expect some 25,000 residents in Austin's downtown area, up from a previous estimate of 5,000. Downtown streets and the two major freeways that feed into them are already severely congested during peak "rush-hour" times and are often moderately congested throughout the day. So with the addition of thousands of auto trips from new residents starting and concluding on these same streets, the question with the onslaught of new development becomes, "How do we keep people moving and accommodate the dramatic increase in the need for parking downtown?"

Before answering that question, let's define the challenge a bit further. The new residents and their cars will create congestion hot spots that will exacerbate the gridlock in several key areas. For example, picture 5th Street from MoPac to downtown during morning rush hour. From MoPac to Lamar is often clogged, but it's currently a delay that is acceptable to motorists. Now, add the Spring condominium and commercial space project at 3rd and Bowie streets with 267 residential units and the 5th Street Commons Project at West Lynn and 5th streets with retail and 138 units. That's a lot more traffic, both from residential and commercial uses. Oops, we forgot the Pressler Apartments with 168 units and restaurant and retail space. That's 573 new residential units alone. But wait, there's more, such as the probable redevelopment of the Brackenridge tract on Lake Austin Boulevard by the University of Texas. Envision hundreds of new residents trying to leave their condos in cars for a morning commute. It's not a pretty picture.

The Spring condos and "Tower"

Uh oh, did we mention the 300 N. Lamar and Gables Park Plaza projects? Or the Seaholm redevelopment? Or across the river at the Bridges on the Park condos, and Toomey Road condos, Old Binswanger Glass redevelopment and Barton Place condos? You get the picture.

Not only do these hot spots delay the movement of people to downtown for work, play and shopping, but they also create serious delays for existing residents trying to get in and out of their neighborhoods. Whether they too are going downtown or in another direction, they are severely impacted. Additionally,

The Pressler development on 5th

where will all the new downtown destination drivers park? Do we build vast new complexes of expensive and unsightly garages for them?

It's not all bad news. A good many of the new downtown area residents obviously will work downtown, and the distance from home to destination will be walkable or bikeable, thus eliminating the need for auto trips. And some area residents farther out will take transit, including the new commuter rail line. For those who end up biking and walking the challenge will be to ensure that we provide a safe way for them to get to their destinations. Hundreds of new bike riders downtown may be a prettier picture, but it quickly turns ugly if you understand that many won't be equipped with the knowledge and the ability to navigate streets safely. New bicyclists, in particular, will turn to sidewalks, or will be pushed aside to the "door zones" pedaling alongside parked cars—both extremely dangerous places to ride.

So let's ask the key question again, and provide part of the solution. "How do we keep people moving and accommodate the dramatic increase in the need for parking downtown? … By ensuring that bicycling is a safe and effective alternative to automobiles."

The percentage of downtown area trips made by bicycle isn't known. (The metropolitan area average is estimated at about 1%, although it's likely much higher in the downtown area). But if bicycling were safe, promoted and incentivized, it's not a stretch to believe that someday 10% of all trips in the central core area would be made on bicycles. This translates into a significant number of cars off the road, and while it certainly won't unclog all congestion, it nevertheless provides people with an option for getting people to their destinations more quickly, directly and without a negative impact on the environment.

So finally, the question becomes, "How do we make bicycling safe and effective?" The answer is provided below.

Imagine a City of Bikes

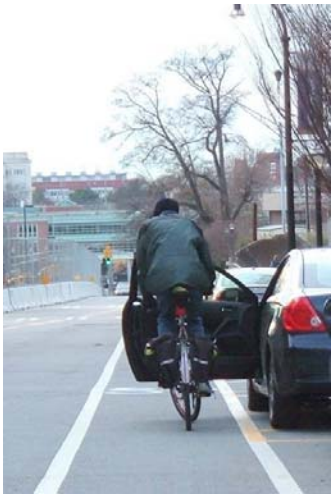
Imagine a city of bikes. Bikes would be so ubiquitous that it wouldn't seem unusual to follow behind several of them on an auto trip downtown, and you'd see them parked in droves along racks and at bicycle stations. The streets would be teeming with people of all ages and sizes on road bikes, cruisers, mountain bikes, and hybrids. Although it happens in other cities all around the world, many planners and officials would dismiss the possibility of American cities packed with bicyclists as a pipe dream. But while Austin may not rival Amsterdam or even Davis California in the next few years, we will see giant leaps in the number of bicyclists downtown due to the aforementioned development. Even without any efforts to promote bicycling, the numbers will rise with thousands of

new residents, many of them willing to try something different to get to nearby destinations. We'll see them, but where will they be riding?

Most planners emphasize connectivity to maximize the effectiveness of bicycle transportation. They want to provide a safe, reliable and relatively quick way to get from point A to B. For example, planners might look at ways to get bicyclists from the new Mueller development to downtown. And indeed, most of the emphasis—and quite rightly so—is on downtown as a destination. But what's often overlooked is that downtown itself isn't a destination. It's the myriad offices, shops, museums, recreational facilities, restaurants, clubs and events that are the destinations. So while key routes connecting different city centers—perhaps with separated facilities like bikeways—is a laudable goal, it doesn't complete the need for promoting more bicycle transportation in the downtown area. That need is to get bicycles *everywhere* quickly and safely.

First, let's address safety. Expert bicycle safety instructors (and crash statistics) will tell you that two extremely dangerous places to ride a bike are on urban sidewalks and in the door zone of streets. Sidewalks are hazardous because they have numerous intersections with driveways, parking garage exits and entrances and roads. Drivers can easily miss seeing a bicyclist because of visual obstructions (e.g. parked cars, trees, etc.), and bicyclists often don't see turning autos. Riding on sidewalks also is illegal for much of downtown and poses threats to pedestrian safety.

The door zone is the area alongside parked cars where bicyclists will collide with a car door if it's opened suddenly. It's a no brainer that you don't want to ride here, especially in areas like metered parking where people are entering and exiting their cars frequently. (See the Door Zone Project at http://www.riinsrants.info/bikes/doorzone.htm and "A dangerous and now deadly bicycle policy" at http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/top/features/documents/02379848.htm)



A bike lane through the door zone

Giving bicyclist their own bike lane is one possible solution. But unfortunately, you either need to have a lot of street width to avoid having bike lanes in the door zone, or you can take out on-street parking to get more space, or you can actually eliminate an auto lane on streets with multiple lanes, or you can take up some of the sidewalk space and install a separated facility like a bikeway. While some of these options might work on routes that are extremely popular with bicyclists, they would be cost prohibitive to do everywhere (at least in the near term) and many downtown businesses would object to large scale reductions in parking, travel lanes or sidewalk space. Additionally, bike lanes can be problematic in urban settings like downtown for the same reasons mentioned above for sidewalks, since there are numerous places where cars will need to turn through the bike lane. And finally, with many of the one-way configurations for four-lane streets downtown, you often would force a bike to exit its lane and cross several auto lanes to turn left.

So if you don't want bicyclists to ride on the sidewalks or door zone and bike lanes aren't a wholesale solution, where do you put all these new bicyclists?

You put them smack in the middle of the travel lane…with the cars.

Taking a Lane

Most advanced bicyclists will tell you that the safest place to ride (as long as you're visible and someone doesn't intentionally run you over) is the middle of a traffic lane. Although state law requires bicyclists to stay as far to the right of a right lane of travel as "practicable," it also allows cyclists to move to the center of the lane if it is necessary for safety reasons. Bicyclists call it "taking a lane" or "controlling a lane." Some riders will only take a lane when it's absolutely necessary, such as avoiding an open car door or debris, or because the lane becomes too narrow to stay right.

A bike "taking a lane"

LOBV's contention is that since riding on sidewalks is dangerous and often illegal, and since downtown streets overwhelmingly have parked cars producing door zones, it then becomes perfectly legal to ride in the middle of the lane.

We'll take it one step further to say that not only is taking a lane perfectly legal, but that it should be promoted as the preferred way for bicycles to travel in the downtown area. Unfortunately, that transformation can't take place overnight. It will require a bit of planning, a bit of money, and a bit of bravery on the part of city officials to make it happen. It will require a "Downtown Bicycle Zone."

** A note regarding pedestrians: While much of the work here is meant to address the specific needs of ensuring safe bicycling, we also value making downtown more walkable. Thus, we would wholeheartedly support efforts for "pedestrian zones" as well (such as those being contemplated by the Capital Area Metropolitan Transportation Authority).*

The Downtown Bicycle Zone

The Downtown Bicycle Zone will be an area that roughly encompasses MLK to the River and IH-35 to Guadalupe (and in some instances Lamar). In that zone, bicycles will be encouraged to take a lane for travel. The encouragement will come in the form of:

1) Public education campaigns funded by the city that inform Austinites about what to expect in the Downtown Bicycle zone.

2) Signage, public art and possible formal road designations (such as sharrows) coordinated and funded by the city that alert motorists to the fact that bicycles should be traveling in the middle of a lane.

3) Law enforcement campaigns that prioritize citations for motorist that harass bicyclists and citations for bicyclists that violate traffic laws.

4) Incentives for Austinites to commute downtown by bicycle, including a Bicycle Commuter Club funded by the city.

More Specifics …The Plan

Bikes would be a common sight on downtown streets.

I. Project Management

The City of Austin will take the lead in planning for the Downtown Bicycle Zone and will hire (or contract) a project manager to assist the city and stakeholders in planning and implementing the zone. LOBV and stakeholders will assist in developing a more specific scope of work based on the recommendations, time lines and budget items in this plan. Additionally, all parties will work to encompass the recommendations from the city's Street Smarts Task Force (See http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/streetsmarts.htm).

II. The Zone Area

As noted, the zone will encompass roughly an area of MLK to the River and IH-35 to Guadalupe (and in some instances Lamar). LOBV and other stakeholders will work with city planners (and the team for the Downtown Plan) to identify specific boundaries.

A. Examination of Streets

Additionally, while we believe the zone concept can work for all downtown streets, the LOBV and stakeholders will analyze possible exceptions on streets or sections of streets that do not make sense and may put bicyclists at greater risk by encouraging them to take a lane.

Berkeley bike boulevard sign

Each street will be examined and mapped to show exactly how bicyclists will be encouraged to travel (lane position) and in which preferred lane. Additionally each street will be examined—and road tested on bicycle—to generate possible scenarios for safety concerns. Finally, each street will be examined to gauge its potential for other amenities, such as bike lanes, separated facilities or commuter stations.

B. Designation of Signage and Zone Markers

LOBV and stakeholders will work with city and downtown planners to pinpoint entry zones and high traffic areas where signage and other techniques will be used to educate motorists and bicyclists about the zone. (See public education, below)

C. Pass Lanes and Bike Boxes

LOBV, stakeholders and planners will examine streets and areas for specialized bicycle lanes that allow bikes to pass cars stuck in congestion and propel them to the front of cars queued at traffic lights. On many intersections these lanes could lead to a "bike box," a specially marked area of pavement that allows a safe zone for bikes at traffic signals. Some hills also might justify special bicycle lanes to get bikes out of the travel lane briefly so that they may climb at a slow rate without significantly impeding traffic. The key for both these techniques, however, will be to ensure that they safely get bikes in and out of travel lanes. Otherwise, the presumption will be to leave the bicycle in its status of taking a lane.

A New York City bike box.

D. Sharrows

LOBV will encourage the city to accept and implement the Street Smarts Task Force recommendation for a sharrows pilot project for Austin and will advocate possible inclusion of sharrows in the zone. Sharrows are shared use lanes, usually with stencils indicating bicycles are encouraged to share the lane.

Lane markings note a "sharrow."

E. Ciclovias and Car-Free Days

LOBV and stakeholders will work with planners to identify possible locations for car-free streets (such as on Sundays or for world car-free days). See: (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciclovia) and (http://www.worldcarfree.net/wcfd/)

III. Public Education and Events

Public education will be the single most important factor in creating the zone.

A. Outreach Coordinator

The city of Austin or its contracted project manager will fund an outreach coordinator responsible for identifying stakeholders and involving them in the planning and implementation process.

B. Public Relations

The city of Austin or its contracted project manager will fund a public relations firm to develop a comprehensive public education campaign for the zone (including identity, graphics, message, advertising, PSAs, media, giveaway blinkie lights, etc.)

C. Signage and Markers

The City of Austin will install signage and other creative techniques (e.g. light banners, murals, and pavement markers) to mark the zone. These markers will promote both the message and identify of the public education campaign and will provide a "tagline" of sorts instructing bicyclists to take a lane and motorists to expect bicyclists in travel lanes. (This is along the lines of "Share the Road," but something more specific.)

D. Public Art

The City of Austin will fund and implement—along with possible private sponsorship—a significant public art campaign celebrating the role of bicycles in Austin culture and transportation. This project could be permanent or temporary, as was done with the Gibson guitar displays.

Berkeley banners welcome bikes downtown.

E. Commuter Club

The City of Austin or its contracted project manager will fund a Commuter Club coordinator to develop and implement incentives for bicycle commuting (or substantial riding) in the downtown area. The club would have the following possible benefits to members: a guaranteed ride home program (possibly under the current program at Capital Metro), discounted bus and rail passes, access to a network of shower and health club shower facilities, discounts at area business, free bicycle safety and riding instruction, and a limited number of mobile bicycle repair vouchers.

F. Ambassadors

The City of Austin or its contracted project manager will fund a squadron of bicycle zone ambassadors paid to kick off the opening of the zone by riding bicycles downtown in shifts (and equipped with garb and materials promoting the zone).

G. Ciclovias and Car-Free Events

The City of Austin will work to initiate ciclovias (car-free streets) or car-free days for the zone for certain special events or designated times.

IV. Law Enforcement

The zone will require some periods of added traffic enforcement for motorists who endanger or harass bicyclists. Likewise, since bicycles will be given the full lane for travel, they too must take added responsibility for following traffic regulations. The city also will require officers to read the manual produced as part of the Street Smarts Task Force that outlines safety and legal issues for bicycles.

V. "Plan B"

For LOBV, "Plan B" is essentially the same as "Plan A," the plan above, minus all City of Austin financial support. In other words, LOBV and other stakeholders will work to integrate bicycles into the center of street lanes for travel from the grass roots level if no city support is approved.

Appendix A: Timeline

Project	June '08	Oct. '08	Jan. '09	April '09	July '09	Oct. '09
Phase I: Approval, Initial planning	Deadline for City Council approval; start identifying stakeholders	Deadline for developing scope of work for contractors; contractors hired by early Dec. 08	Initial outreach and planning by contractors and stakeholders.			
Phase II: Final planning and development of public education campaign				Final planning (exact boundaries, street assessments) begins; public education campaign development	Public education campaign implemented; law enforcement training;	
Phase III: Zone kickoff						Kickoff of Bicycle zone; ambassadors hired;
Phase IV: Evaluation and reporting	*Stakeholders and planners will work throughout the process to determine how the project will be evaluated.*					

Appendix B: Estimated Budget

Components	Estimated Budget	Notes
Project Management	$120,000	Could be incorporated in city's Bicycle/Pedestrian program, dependent on staffing levels.
Outreach Coordination	$60,000	Could be incorporated in city's Bicycle/Pedestrian program, dependent on staffing levels.
Public Relations	$100,000	
Commuter Club	$75,000	Requires an ongoing budget, to be determined. Possibilities for private-sector sponsorship.
Public Art Project	$100,000	Possibilities for private-sector sponsorship
Signage / Markings	$400,000	
Ambassadors	$8,000	Possibilities for volunteer efforts
Total	**$863,000**	

Appendix C: Contacts

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