



Central Texas Regional  
Mobility Authority

## AGENDA ITEM #7 SUMMARY

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Quarterly briefing on the MoPac Improvement Project.

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**Department: Engineering**

**Associated Costs: None**

**Funding Source: None**

**Board Action Required: None**

**Description of Matter:**

**The report is an account of the activities on the MoPac Improvement Project from July through September, 2011.**

**Attached documentation for reference:**

**GEC Quarterly Activities Report and Board Presentation**

**MoPac eNewsletter**

**Contact for further information:**

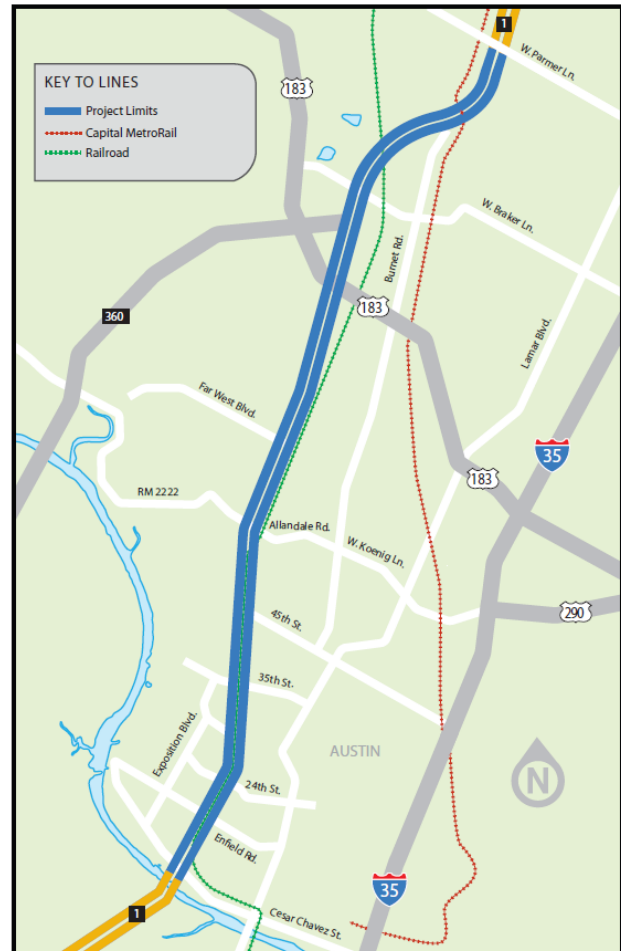
**Wesley M. Burford, P.E., Director of Engineering**

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The 11-mile stretch of MoPac between Parmer Lane and Cesar Chavez Street is one of Austin's most important arteries, serving as a key route to downtown and points beyond. As a primary alternative to Interstate 35, MoPac moves more than 180,000 cars and trucks each day. This stretch of MoPac is currently seeing high levels of congestion and unreliable operations. At the urging of local and state leaders, the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (Mobility Authority), the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), the City of Austin and Capital Metro (CapMetro) have teamed up to develop a reasonable solution to the mobility problem in this corridor that takes into account the needs of drivers, transit riders and the concerns of surrounding neighbors.

Any proposed improvements would require approval from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). TxDOT and the Mobility Authority are currently working together to complete preliminary schematic design and environmental studies following the requirements set by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (also known as "NEPA"). The preliminary design and environmental phase is scheduled to be completed by the summer of 2012. If the approved Project has a toll component, the Mobility Authority will take responsibility for the financing, design, construction, operations, and maintenance of the facility.

This report describes the status of the MoPac Improvement Project and documents the activities accomplished in the third quarter of 2011.



# ACTIVITIES

The following activities have been accomplished by TxDOT, the Mobility Authority, and their consultants during the reporting period.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA) AND SCHEMATIC DESIGN

- **Environmental Process Schedule:** The environmental process is on schedule. An environmental finding from FHWA is anticipated in the fall of 2012.
- **EA Document Status:** The draft EA was submitted to FHWA for review and comment ahead of schedule on September 19. Review is anticipated to be complete by mid November. Any comments received will be responded to, and the document updated and resubmitted for final review in December. If the EA is deemed satisfactory for further processing, it will be released for public review and a Public Hearing held in the spring of 2012.
- **Recommended Preferred Alternative Selection:** After a careful evaluation process, the team has narrowed down the original 10 possible solutions to meet the transportation need on MoPac to two alternatives: the no-build alternative and the express lanes build alternative. The former would leave MoPac as it exists now with no additional capacity; this alternative must be carried forward to comply with federal and state requirements. The later consists of adding one tolled express lane in each direction within existing right-of-way; this build alternative is the team's recommended "preferred alternative" for the project. The express lane alternative is being recommended by the team because of (1) its ability to meet the Need and Purpose of the project, and (2) the level of environmental, community, and historic impacts relative to the other build alternatives. If FHWA concurs with the recommendation, the express lanes build alternative will become the "preferred alternative." The preferred alternative and the findings of the environmental assessment will be presented for public review and comment at a public hearing – tentatively scheduled to be held in the spring of 2012.
- **Schematic Design:** The draft project schematic is still undergoing review at FHWA. It is anticipated that the schematic will be finalized before the end of the year after design exceptions and alternative analysis are approved by FHWA.
- **Design Exceptions:** Design exceptions were submitted to FHWA for approval earlier this year; the team received comments back from FHWA on October 3, 2011. TxDOT plans to submit responses by October 21. A decision from FHWA is anticipated in mid November.
- **Sound Wall Workshops:** TxDOT conducted seven sound wall workshops in June, July and August, with the support of the Mobility Authority. More than 200 citizens attended the workshops to learn about the sound mitigation process and see the locations and heights of the walls near their neighborhoods. Each workshop was targeted to address a specific neighborhood. Prior to the workshops, letters with voting ballots were sent to adjacent property owners who would be impacted by the walls. These impacted property owners were given the chance to vote on whether or not they want a sound wall adjacent to them. Of the 22 wall segments that were identified by the environmental study, 19 walls received a simple majority of "yes" to sound wall construction and will be included in the Project, and

three walls received a simple majority of "no" to sound wall construction and will not be included with this project.

One sound wall segment, which stretches approximately a mile along Great Northern Blvd between Far West Boulevard to RM 2222, would be located within City right-of-way; thus, City approval is required to construct the wall. If the City does not approve the placement of the wall within its right-of-way, the wall will not be constructed.

Additional information on sound wall workshops results was posted online and can be viewed here: <http://www.mopacexpress.com/environmental/sound-walls.php>

Construction of sound walls along MoPac is contingent upon the results of the ongoing environmental study and funding availability for the Project.

- **Historic Resources:** The Project Team met with Texas Historical Commission (THC) in September to facilitate resolution of the remaining historical issues; primarily the visual effects of sound walls on affected historical properties. A revised coordination package was submitted on Monday, October 3. Comments are due back from THC and consulting parties by October 31, 2011.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

### *Messaging, Information, and Meetings*

- **Stakeholder Meetings:** The Project Team continues to coordinate with stakeholders. Various stakeholder meetings held in the third quarter of this year include:
  - MoPac Neighborhood Associations Coalition (MoNAC)
  - Bike/pedestrian mobility representatives from CAMPO, FHWA, City of Austin, Bicycle Advisory Council, BikeTexas, League of Bicycle Voters, and Austin Metro Trails and Greenways.
  - Utility Representatives – including electric (both transmission and distribution), water, fiber optic, and cable
- **Informational Workshops:** Informational Workshops are anticipated to be held in early 2012 with the purpose of providing general information to key stakeholders on express lanes and dynamic pricing.
- **Open House Meetings:** Open Houses, featuring project-specific information, are planned to be held prior to the Public Hearing in early spring 2012.
- **Project Updates:** The Mobility Authority sends Project Updates via e-mail on a monthly basis to several key stakeholders. These Project Updates provide a short summary of the progress achieved on the Project over the previous weeks. Project Updates were e-mailed on July 22, August 19, and September 29.
- **E-Newsletter:** The next e-Newsletter will be sent out to project stakeholders in October 2011 and feature the results of the sound wall workshops and bicycle/pedestrian mobility outreach.

- **Project Focus Groups:** As express lanes have been selected as the recommended preferred alternative, the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) will conduct focus group studies on the messaging provided on the Express Lane signage in early December. Four independent focus groups will be selected for this study which will evaluate various signing arrangements and text to identify the most appropriate approach to signing the project. The results from this study will be available early next year.

## PROJECT DEVELOPMENT / PROCUREMENT

- **Utilities:** TxDOT and the Mobility Authority are continuing discussions with major utilities along the corridor. The Team's goal is to reduce the number of utility relocations and start long lead-time efforts to reduce impact to the construction schedule. In July, TxDOT, Mobility Authority, City of Austin, Austin Energy, and Austin Water Utility personnel met to discuss constructability and access issues related to the locations of the proposed sound walls along Great Northern Blvd and other locations along the corridor. Follow-up coordination is expected.
- **T&R Studies:** A Level 2 Traffic and Revenue (T&R) Study has been completed and a final version was submitted on September 2, 2011. An Investment Grade (Level 3) Study will be initiated early next year, if required.
- **Design/Build (D/B) or P3:** The Project Team continues to review the implications of potentially developing the project through a P3 process versus Design/Build. An RFI was issued to the P3 community on October 4, 2011 to determine if there is private sector interest in participation in the project's finance, operations, and maintenance. A recommendation on which approach to take is anticipated to come before the Mobility Authority Board of Directors either late this year or early next year.

### Context Sensitive Design (CSD)

- **Bike/Pedestrian Mobility:** The Project Team has continued to coordinate with the bicyclist/pedestrian mobility community, City of Austin, CAMPO, and FHWA on potential improvements to the bike and pedestrian facilities along and across the MoPac Corridor. On September 15, TxDOT and the Mobility Authority, in partnership with the City of Austin, presented to the Bicycle Advisory Council the bicycle and pedestrian improvements which have been incorporated into the Project for environmental study, with favorable response from the council.
- **Project Aesthetics:** Utilizing the preferred aesthetic concept identified during the Context Sensitive Design process, the Project Team continues to develop aesthetic guidelines for the project. These guidelines will be included in the contract documents to make sure the final design and materials reflect the aesthetics selected.

## FUNDING / AGREEMENTS

- **US DOT Funding Sources:** The Mobility Authority and financial advisors met with the TIFIA Program for a debrief on the declined Letter of Interest, and received a favorable and helpful response. TIFIA may still be a financial opportunity for the MoPac Improvement Project.
- **City of Austin Prop 1:** Discussions are ongoing with City of Austin on the use of the \$100K included in the Prop 1 Bond package for the MoPac project. The Mobility Authority recommended applying these funds to the operations analysis being conducted at the 5<sup>th</sup> Street/Cesar Chavez intersection as well as design guidelines for structures and landscaping that impact the local street intersections.
- **Union Pacific Railroad Agreements:** In September, the Mobility Authority met with Union Pacific Railroad representatives to discuss the Project and various agreements which will be needed for work within UPRR property (i.e. MoPac bridge widening over UPRR tracks). UPRR representatives gained a better understanding of the recent status of the Project, and both entities were able to improve upon an already good working relationship.
- **TxDOT Project Development Agreement:** The Project Development Agreement will clarify the roles of TxDOT and the Mobility Authority during the upcoming final design, construction, operations, and maintenance of the Project. A draft has been developed but will not be completed until a decision on an implementation method (D/B vs. P3) is made.

# SCHEDULE

**The overall Project remains on schedule.** An environmental finding from FHWA is anticipated by the fall of 2012. If the Express Lanes alternative moves forward as the FHWA-approved recommended preferred alternative and the project is further developed as design/build, the bond sale would occur in early 2013 followed by an anticipated start of design and construction. It is anticipated that, following this schedule, a facility could potentially be open to traffic in 2015. If the project moves forward as a P3, it is still anticipated that the facility could be open to traffic in 2015.

## SCHEDULE RISK ASSESSMENT



Environmental Process / TxDOT & FHWA Coordination



Resolution on Design Exceptions by FHWA



Public and Political Opinion



Coordination with UPRR / City of Austin / CapMetro



Traffic and Revenue - Financing

## UPCOMING MILESTONES

- City of Austin Vote on Sound Walls in November
- FHWA Resolution of Design Exceptions and Alternatives Analysis
- Determination of Project Development approach (D/B vs. P3)
- Completion of the Focus Group Process

## MILESTONES MATRIX

<b>Milestone</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Status</b>
<b>Restart Environmental Study and Public Involvement</b>	Summer 2010	Complete
<b>Market Valuation / Exercise Primacy</b>	Fall 2010	Complete
<b>Develop and Refine Preliminary Alternatives</b>	Fall 2010	Complete
<b>Conduct Open House Meetings (Round 1 &amp; 2)</b>	Fall 2010	Complete
<b>Reasonable Alternatives Refinement</b>	Winter 2010/ 2011	Complete
<b>Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and Schematic Complete - Initiate Review Process</b>	February 2011	Complete
<b>TxDOT Austin District EA Review Begins</b>	February 2011	Complete
<b>Restart Aesthetics Committee</b>	March 2011	Complete
<b>Complete Level 2 Traffic and Revenue (T&amp;R)</b>	May 2011	Complete
<b>Context Sensitive Design Advisory Committee Meetings</b>	March-May 2011	Complete
<b>TxDOT Environmental Division EA Review</b>	Spring 2011	In Progress
<b>Conduct Open House Meeting (Round 3)</b>	May 2011	Complete
<b>Conduct Sound Wall Workshops</b>	Summer 2011	Complete
<b>FHWA Resolution on Design Exceptions</b>	Summer 2011	In Progress
<b>FHWA Begin Schematic Review</b>	Summer 2011	In Progress
<b>FHWA Begins EA Review</b>	Fall 2011	In Progress
<b>FHWA Approval of Schematic Design</b>	Fall 2011	In Progress
<b>Conduct Open House Meetings (Round 4)</b>	Fall 2011	No longer scheduled
<b>EA is deemed "Satisfactory for Further Processing" by FHWA</b>	Winter 2011/2012	
<b>Conduct Community Open Houses and Public Hearings on the Draft EA</b>	Spring 2012	
<b>Submittal of Final EA to TxDOT/FHWA</b>	Spring 2012	
<b>Environmental Finding from FHWA</b>	Summer 2012	



## Sound Wall Vote

Property owners immediately adjacent to MoPac have indicated they want sound walls built along many segments of the highway to lessen road noise, according to a vote undertaken as part of the planning process for the MoPac Improvement Project.

Three of the 22 sound walls were voted down by adjacent property owners (generally the first row of residential properties along MoPac); the three segments voted down are on the east side of the corridor:

- Sound Wall #2, along Great North Blvd. between Pinecrest Drive and Foster Lane;
- Sound Wall #19, just north of 10th Street., and;
- Sound Wall #20a, closest to Cesar Chavez Street. on the south end of the study area.

To view the location of the sound wall segments, go to: [www.MoPacExpress.com/environmental/soundwalls.php](http://www.MoPacExpress.com/environmental/soundwalls.php)

Less than 51 percent of the ballots were received on six other sound wall segments (1, 8, 10, 14, 15 and 22) despite a second re-polling effort in September. Rules for noise abatement direct the Texas Department of Transportation to make the final decision on whether a wall gets built in cases where a majority vote is not received after a second re-polling effort. TxDOT, in coordination with the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (Mobility Authority) and the City of Austin, has decided to include these walls in the project.

The City will also consider if Sound Wall #3, which stretches more than a mile along Great Northern Blvd. between Far West Blvd. to RM 2222, may be built in city right-of-way. If the Austin City Council does not approve the wall within city right-of-way, it will not be built as part of improvements to MoPac.

Construction of sound walls along MoPac is anticipated to occur in 2013/2014 and is contingent upon approval of the project by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The sound walls, if constructed, would be built as part of the proposed MoPac Improvement Project (between Parmer Lane and Cesar Chavez Street).

More than 200 citizens attended seven workshops held this summer along the MoPac improvement corridor to learn how noise from the highway could be buffered by new sound walls built in public right-of-way.



## MoPac Aesthetic Concept: Developed, Backed by Citizens

A preliminary aesthetic design concept for the MoPac Improvement Project has been selected following a collaborative design effort to ensure that any improvements made within the MoPac corridor support community desires to maintain the visual quality of the corridor.

Building on a MoPac aesthetic advisory effort from 2007, a context sensitive design committee was formed this spring with representatives from MoNAC (the MoPac Neighborhood Associations Coalition), several neighborhood associations, the Northwest Austin Civic Association, the City of Austin and the Texas Historical Commission. The 12-member committee focused on aesthetic components that were constructible, maintainable and cost-effective for the MoPac corridor.

The committee identified specific features such as the intersection treatments, the shape of retaining walls, the scale and light mass of the columns, along with the warm color of the surface treatments.

During a May 26th open house meeting, two designs were presented and attendees validated the design concept preferred by the citizen advisory committee. The selected concept includes aesthetic features for sound walls, bridge structures, retaining walls, sign structures and landscaping that would be incorporated into the project if a “build” alternative is ultimately selected. Project planners/designers are developing the project’s aesthetic guidelines based on the selected concept.



**PUBLIC VIEW**

Graphics are conceptual in nature. Final design elements may differ due to construction techniques.



**PRIVATE VIEW**

### **Context Sensitive Design Committee Members**

*Members include representatives from:*

- *MoNAC Neighborhood Association*
- *Deep Eddy Neighborhood Association*
- *Old Enfield Neighborhood Association*
- *Allandale Neighborhood Association*
- *Old West Austin Neighborhood Association*
- *Bryker Woods Neighborhood Association*
- *Balcones West Neighborhood Association*
- *Highland Park West Balconies Area Neighborhood Association*
- *Northwest Austin Civic Association*
- *City of Austin, Historic Preservation Officer*
- *Texas Historical Commission*



## Public Input, Analysis Narrows in on Preferred Alternative for MoPac

Potential ways to deal with traffic congestion on MoPac – one of Austin’s busiest highways – are being narrowed down with the goal of having a single “preferred alternative” by spring.

The study – a combined effort of TxDOT, the Mobility Authority, the City of Austin, Capital Metro and the public – is focused on an 11-mile section of MoPac between Parmer Lane and Cesar Chavez Street.

Nearly 176,000 cars and trucks travel MoPac each day. As the metropolitan area grows, transportation officials say traffic congestion will increase on MoPac, a key route to downtown Austin and beyond.

### **Project Need**

- *Correct unreliable operations caused by increasing congestion*

### **Project Purpose**

- *Improve mobility*
- *Manage congestion*
- *Provide a reliable transit route to reduce travel times*
- *Improve emergency response*
- *Maximize use of the facility*

To be eligible for federal transportation funds, the study – officially called an environmental assessment – must be done in accordance with federal and state regulations. Transportation officials reinitiated the study in June, 2010 and anticipate holding a public hearing to present study findings and a preferred alternative next spring.

Initially, 10 possible solutions were considered and outlined at public open houses last fall. Five alternatives were eliminated based on their failure to meet the project’s need and purpose. Efforts since the public open houses have tentatively narrowed the field of possible solutions to two: a build alternative and the no-build alternative (which is federally required to be carried forward).

The no-build alternative would leave MoPac as it currently exists. No capacity would be added, and no funds or energy would be expended to construct the project.

The build alternative, which has been identified as the “recommended” solution by the Project Team, consists of adding one tolled express lane in each direction within existing right-of-way. The express lane alternative is being recommended by the Project Team because of (1) its ability to meet the Need and Purpose of the project (including reliability and mobility advantages), and (2) the level of environmental, community and historic impacts relative to the other build alternatives. The express lane alternative also has a greater potential for successful delivery because the collection of tolls would provide the revenue stream needed to fund the final design, construction, operations, and maintenance of the project.

Alternatives without a tolling component lack the revenue stream needed, and other traditional funding sources are not currently available. When formulating its recommendation, the Project Team considered public input received during the fall open houses.



*Two alternatives identified for further evaluation in the Environmental Assessment, based on public input and detailed analysis by the Project Team:*

**Adding one express lane in each direction** – Built within existing right-of-way, the objective of this alternative is to improve operating conditions for transit, registered vanpools, and first responders on MoPac. Some motorists not using transit or vanpools could also choose to pay to use the Express Lanes, thus reducing demand on the existing non-tolled general purpose lanes. Toll charges would vary, depending on traffic conditions.

**A “no-build” alternative** – This would leave MoPac as it exists now with no additional capacity. Although a “no-build” alternative would not meet the project’s need and purpose, it is carried forward for additional study to comply with federal and state requirements.

Currently, the FHWA is reviewing the draft environmental assessment and the Project Team’s recommendation. If FHWA concurs with the recommendation, it will become the “preferred alternative.” The preferred alternative and the findings of the environmental assessment will be presented for public review and comment at a public hearing – tentatively scheduled to be held in the spring of 2012.

The FHWA will thoroughly consider the findings of the environmental assessment as well as public hearing input when deciding whether the project moves forward to construction or if additional study is required.

Public comment can be made at:  
[www.MopacExpress.com/contact](http://www.MopacExpress.com/contact).

## Project Timeline



## Bicyclist & Pedestrian Needs Considered

Partners of the MoPac Improvement Project met with the Austin Bicycle Advisory Council on September 15th to continue coordination efforts aimed at addressing bicyclist and pedestrian needs in the MoPac corridor.

The meeting was part of an ongoing dialogue to identify gaps in the existing bicycle network and evaluate locations and priorities where additional bicycle/pedestrian facilities are desired along the corridor.

Options being proposed include:

- A Shared Use Path for bicyclists and pedestrians west of the southbound frontage road between Walnut Creek and Capital of Texas Highway (Loop 360);
- A Shared Use Path northbound through the MoPac-U.S. 183 interchange (see graphic);
- Improved east/west connectivity for bicyclists and pedestrians at 13 cross streets between Park Bend Drive and Enfield Road; and
- Closing gaps in the sidewalks along the MoPac frontage roads between Parmer Lane and Anderson Lane.

Planners are currently forming recommendations for inclusion in the ongoing environmental assessment for the MoPac Improvement Project area (between Parmer Lane and Cesar Chavez Street). Their recommendations will balance mobility needs with the ability to finance the project.

### Bicycle/Pedestrian: SUP Highlights

Northbound through US 183 interchange Shoal Creek Blvd to Neils Thompson Drive, use detention pond site



\*A Shared Use Path is in blue and the proposed locations to fill in sidewalk gaps are in red.

### Bicycle/Pedestrian: East/West Highlights

Far West Blvd bicycle refuge area



### Bicycle/Pedestrian: East/West Highlights

Connection to 34th Street



## Your Opinion Matters

Public input is critical to the success of the MoPac Improvement Project. As solutions to the traffic congestion on MoPac are considered, your opinion matters. Users of the MoPac corridor, neighborhood organizations, businesses and others are joining the process to find an alternative that is an effective and responsible solution and meets the project's Need and Purpose. In fact, since the project was reinitiated in June 2010, over 450 comments have been received and analyzed. These comments and the environmental analysis are being used to develop a preferred alternative.

Comments on the project may be submitted in the following ways:

- In person at open houses or workshops
- Online: [www.MoPacExpress.com/contact](http://www.MoPacExpress.com/contact)
- By mail to: TxDOT Austin District  
Environmental Coordinator  
P.O. Drawer 15426  
Austin, Texas 78761-5426



## Contact Us

We encourage you to contact us with questions or to request a meeting or presentation. MoPac Improvement Project team members are available to speak to your neighborhood or other organization at your request. To contact project planners or staff, visit our website: [www.MoPacExpress.com/contact/](http://www.MoPacExpress.com/contact/) or call us at: 512.996.9778.

