



Downtown Austin Alliance

INNOVATION

Our project aims to make the most of the major infrastructure investment TxDOT is making through central Austin and downtown. Recognizing an investment and opportunity of this size and scope comes around only once every 50 years, the Downtown Alliance saw the potential to create a vision that would shift the project paradigm, transforming the I-35 corridor into an asset for our community.

The ULI panel served as a way to gain legitimacy for the vision and energize the community. The panel emphasized the risk of failure if Austin residents were unable or unwilling to come together around a community vision. And the panel supported the importance of successfully engaging the community to create a shared vision for surface enhancements as the best way to ensure TxDOT builds the underlying infrastructure needed to execute it.

As a downtown organization, we regularly deal with issues that have social and economic impacts that extend well beyond our boundaries. While reconstruction of I-35 will inevitably impact the future of downtown, the corridor is also at the center of the Texas Capitol and serves as the primary trade corridor for the U.S. from Mexico to Canada.

With no formal or informal leadership in place to take on this challenge, we took the initiative to form a collaborative group, combining local, county, state and community leadership. We also forged new and stronger relationships with TxDOT, proving state transportation departments can be influenced to provide solutions that work for the community.

OUTCOME

The panel produced an impactful set of recommendations which were presented to 250 community members in a 105-slide presentation, which was also live-streamed for inclusivity.

The process of improving I-35 will span over a decade, and the maintenance and operation of the amenities created as part of the community's vision will continue indefinitely. This is one step in a very long 10-year process, and will require a coalition of community champions.

In the near-term, the panel recommended that the Downtown Alliance, the City of Austin and leadership from East Austin partner to co-lead the project. The desired intent is that TxDOT builds the infrastructure to support these amenities, reducing the cost to the community. Finally, an entity will need to be identified to build, operate and maintain the caps, stitches or other amenities that will hopefully result as a part of this vision, and a funding strategy such as a TIF will be needed to generate the funds for operation and programming.

To inspire community champions, the Downtown Alliance engaged the ULI panel to show that this project can enhance safety, quality of life, and value for residents, business owners, developers and visitors. The community embraced the panel as a group of unbiased experts and began to realize this project has major implications beyond downtown. What will likely be most impactful is the diverse, inclusive leadership structure to move the project forward.

EXECUTION

The success of the panel largely depends on the preparation that goes into the process.

Since there was no leadership group or structure in place to take on this type of project in our community, we created one. The leadership group convened consists of state, local, institutional, community, and transportation leaders needed to champion the project. The Downtown Alliance also assembled a diverse task force that was highly engaged in the process, from understanding the technical aspects of the project to ensuring that the briefing book accurately depicted the history of I-35, wishes of the community, and environmental landscape.

We tasked multiple consultant teams with: reaching community members with whom we had no relationships; creating a communication strategy for broad community outreach; and distilling the technical feasibility of the project, including assessing design strategies.

We planned a tour that showed the history of the corridor and cultural assets that are so meaningful to our community, and our communication and follow up ensured that all 99 people invited showed up to interview with the panelists. Multiple panelists commented that this panel was better prepared for and had more pre-engagement than any panel process they had previously been a part of.

REPRESENTATION

The long-term success of this project depended upon it being an inclusive process, and partners were involved at every level. The voices of historically marginalized East Austinites were especially important. Therefore, the Leadership Group included Council Member Harper Madison (East Austin), and President Pierce-Burnette from Huston-Tillotson University.

We knew the interviews should not only reflect the views of our immediate stakeholders, but also many other members of the community. Therefore, we engaged Public City, a consulting group with deep relationships in East Austin, who created a brain trust of leaders and other community members in order to effectively capture their history and perspectives.

Additionally, 13 Austinites, mainly from East Austin joined our tour as guides, providing a stunning oral history that laid the foundation for a history of racial inequity in Austin that the panel needed to understand. The panelists gained context by visiting cultural institutions, parks, murals, locally owned shops and restaurants.

Finally, it was important that the final panel presentation was open to as many community members as possible. We shared the event widely, over 400 people RSVP'd to the presentation, the event was live-streamed and the presentation was immediately posted on our website after the event.

REPLICATION

This project is replicable to a wide range of budgets. Through this project, we learned about working with state transportation departments/agencies through advocacy and policy to enhance outcomes, influence public infrastructure and ask for better solutions for the community.

Convening leadership groups and task forces to serve as community champions is a widely replicable tactic that could serve a variety of projects with a range of budgets. Communities can also tap into their local expertise, including professors, students and faculty from universities, engineers and transportation experts.

Through this project, we also advocated for more equitable outcomes for our community and built partnerships that were long overdue. We began to build new relationships, knowing that we cannot change the past, but can influence the future. We know that coming together as a community will ultimately create a much stronger outcome.

Reimagining highway infrastructure is something being done in many cities across the United States and internationally. Currently there are over 30 projects proposed to reimagine highway infrastructure in the United States, and 20 completed.

Urban Land Institute Advisory Services have been engaged to create change in cities has for over 70 years and in 12 countries.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The most complicated, challenging aspect of this project revolves around mistrust of community leaders. In 1928, city council adopted a plan forcing black residents to live within a six square-mile area of East Austin. In the 1930's, I-35 was known as East Avenue, and served as a gathering place for minority communities. In the late 50s, East Avenue was bulldozed and I-35 has been a physical barrier dividing our city since. Additionally, since the 1990s, Austin has seen a dramatic rise in housing costs, disproportionately impacting communities of color in east Austin.

We had to overcome the deep mistrust of East Austin community leaders to properly execute this project. There was no shortcutting this process. The first conversation we had with our east Austin brain trust members, we had to let them express their frustrations and concerns and simply listen. Another complex challenge to the project was communicating relevance and vision. When there is so much growth happening in the community and so much to focus on, it is hard to convince the community that this work is relevant right now. People have a hard time envisioning the impact a project of this scale could have on our community.