

Mayor Garcia and Councilmembers—

In the last few days, there have been several letters from respected citizens expressing concerns with the Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA) position on the proposed near term changes to streets in central Austin. I would like to clarify why the DAA Board of Directors voted unanimously to support these changes.

For the past 50 years, streets in Austin have been designed with only one goal—moving vehicles in and out of Downtown as quickly as possible. Over the past 25 years, more and more Downtowns in the United States and Canada have shifted focus to the pedestrian experience. Following the lead of many other cities across the United States, Downtown Austin has come to the conclusion that improving the pedestrian environments is critical for developing a thriving multi-use Downtown. Starting with the experts in the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team of 1991, every Downtown planner, retail developer, urban designer, etc. has all recommended converting the lower-traffic streets to two-way operation.

Because of possible impacts on property values, Downtown property owners are cautious when it comes to major changes in street operation. Consequently, the DAA asked the City to run the numbers on the traffic impacts of converting some streets to two-way operation. This has been done. The City contracted with Wilbur Smith Associates, an international and internationally recognized firm of engineers, to model the traffic in Downtown Austin. Under this contract, traffic counts for every movement through every intersection in Downtown were entered into a network simulation model called CORSIM. This is the standard model used by federal, state and local transportation agencies. Wilbur Smith also took into account the special conditions generated by parking garages, hotels, transit routes, etc. These conditions are in the model, which covers an area extending from the Capitol to Riverside, IH-35 to the West End, including all of the street network that is critical to Downtown.

In addition to the Wilbur Smith traffic modeling, the DAA provided a special service for its members. We asked Taylor-Simpson to review the operation of all parking garages in Downtown and estimate the costs of adapting them to the proposed configurations. In each case, Taylor-Simpson met with the owners of the facilities to review needed changes. (City staff are recommending that these conversion costs should be borne by the City, not the property owners. For the first set of 20 facilities, the total cost is estimated at \$146,154 for the minimal option for One Congress, and \$206,347 for the preferred option for One Congress. I.e., the cost of conversion averages \$7000-\$10,000 per facility.)

After several iterations of the network model, City staff has recommended proposed changes that are a balance of competing needs. Major access routes are recommended to stay one-way and to have various traffic enhancements, such as the reversible lane on S. 1st Street, which will mitigate rush hour congestion. Mobility within Downtown will be enhanced with two-way streets, which have the advantages of allowing more direct, less confusing routes. In addition, the two-way pattern is conducive to retail uses with an improved pedestrian environment.

Having asked for this traffic impact analysis, the DAA relies on it. Wilbur Smith's traffic engineers have no bias in favor of two-way streets, have no interest in underestimating

delays, and have done a state-of-the art, comprehensive network model of Downtown. The results are clear: with all of the recommended changes, the model predicts that there will be LESS congestion, LESS delay, and overall BETTER traffic flow at rush hour than if we retain the existing street configuration. In fact, the largest increased delay during the peak traffic time (afternoon rush hour) anywhere in the system is **93 seconds** for those who travel on 7th Street from Guadalupe to IH-35. It is the judgment of the DAA that this minimal delay is acceptable; major delays would not be.

The DAA has been assured that the proposed changes will be implemented in stages, with the full involvement of the property owners on each street. This is not a case of "do something and see what happens," but rather an orderly process of implementing significant changes. Some call for further objective review. That is what the traffic modeling by Wilbur Smith Associates did; the network model is the objective, indeed, expert review that supports these proposals. Let's be clear. It is possible to disagree with the conclusions. It is not possible to dismiss the process that led to those conclusions as being less than thorough, open, objective, and comprehensive.

Given that access to Downtown is preserved and in some places enhanced, and that delays resulting from proposed changes are minimal according to the best available expert analysis, the Downtown Austin Alliance Board voted unanimously to support these changes, as stated in the resolution:

To accomplish the goals of improving access to and mobility within Downtown and enhancing street life through the Great Streets Program, the DAA supports the City of Austin staff recommendations for near-term changes to Downtown streets.

The DAA agrees with the City staff commitments to:

- a. Implement Great Streets projects in phases over the five year period, and not to move to a subsequent phase until we together are satisfied that both the technical objectives have been met and that community response to the previous phase is favorable.*
- b. Work block-by-block, development-by-development in consultation with property owners and the DAA. We want to maintain the Great Streets vision and make the prototype compatible with the existing downtown community of buildings.*
- c. Recommend to the City Manager and Council to include funding for garage conversion costs associated with the change from one-way to two-way streets.*

The DAA strongly encourages the City to:

- a. Undertake a master plan to articulate and implement the vision of Cesar Chavez as a two-way grand boulevard.*
- b. Develop and implement strategies to improve western access to Downtown.*
- c. Give priority to heavily-used pedestrian corridors as implementation of Great Streets proceeds.*
- d. Temporarily locate the Lance Armstrong Bikeway on 4th Street, but to relocate to 3rd Street when light rail becomes a reality or when 3rd Street becomes a two-way street.*

The DAA remains committed to creating a great Downtown; we welcome the involvement and participation of all our community in this endeavor.

Beverly Silas, Chair