

Riverside Drive and the Town Lake Park Master Plan

The Master Plan in a Nutshell

The consulting team from EDAW, under the guidance of the Town Lake Park stakeholders group, have formulated and presented a splendid master plan for Town Lake Park. Their recent work includes a layout and plan for the open space component, stretching from Barton Springs Road all the way to Town Lake. This park is broken into various spaces, including a great meadow with a major interactive water feature at its heart west of the civic center site, a shady water garden area with a small pond along the Bouldin Creek corridor north of the Daugherty, the Auditorium Shores performance area and lawn, which is essentially as it is currently developed north of Palmer, and a "Bottomland Woods" area with a largely shaded network of strolling trails, picnic areas, and informal park space between Auditorium Shores and Bouldin Creek between what is now Riverside Drive and the lake. The Pitch and Putt area west of the railroad would remain basically intact. A major view corridor crosses the park from Barton Springs Road to Town Lake between the civic center site and the Daugherty. EDAW has recommended closing Riverside Drive completely. I believe the park plan is a faithful and well-crafted realization of the community's vision for the park and is consistent with the guidance provided by the stakeholders throughout the process.

Riverside Drive

An absolutely critical aspect of the park design is the proposed removal of Riverside Drive between South First Street and the railroad tracks, as recommended by EDAW. But EDAW acknowledges that as one of the major components of the plan, this is a policy decision that will need to be made by City Council.

In this note I wish to present a justification for closing the road. The two basic questions are, "Why close Riverside Drive?" and "Why not close Riverside Drive?"

Why Close Riverside Drive?

Closing the street is what would create the opportunity to build a great and unified central park instead of a composition of two highly compromised adjacent parks.

To build a great park requires a great tract of land, aggregated so that its critical mass can create a rich park environment with a strong sense of identity and a variety of recreational opportunities. The problem here is that there is not all that much land available, as great central parks go. The site chosen for the new civic events center encroaches deeply into the center of the tract we think of as "the 54 acres". The remaining open space south of Riverside Drive is not terribly substantial. The only way to conceive of a great park on the remaining land is to unify it with the parkland north of Riverside, and this is what EDAW has proposed to accomplish.

Leaving Riverside in place would consume not only its right-of-way, which is quite substantial, but would also consign a broad band of parkland along the roadway to being a mere buffer against the roadway, tactically useless for the kinds of recreation envisioned for this park. Witness the current situations with Riverside, with Barton

Springs Road through Zilker, and with Cesar Chavez west of Lamar. Despite the fact that the Auditorium Shores tract has perhaps the most striking view in the city, the sweeping meadows between Riverside and the hike and bike trail are all but devoid of activity. Likewise in Zilker Park, where the only park visitors you are likely to see within 75 yards of Barton Springs Road are soccer goalies or those struggling to get across the road, and none of those folks are by any means relaxed. It is a tragedy that Zilker is so damaged by the road, but at least in Zilker there is enough land left over to support two wonderful recreational areas. This is simply not true in Town Lake Park, which is also inhibited by Barton Springs Road. Leaving the Riverside corridor through the heart of the tract reduces its prime recreational area to a rather small island in the western half of the 54 acres and to the currently popular strip along Town Lake.

Bisecting the park would disrupt many aspects of its design and concept. The theme of a Hill Country meadow flowing into a bottomland woods and a creekside grove would be fragmented. The possibility of ever devoting some large chunk of land to a special enhancement, for example creating a formal botanical garden northwest of the performing arts and civic centers, would be almost completely foreclosed. The fundamental concept of Town Lake Park as being a respite park in the heart of the city would be shot through the heart. Only in certain recesses would there be any peace from the noise of of commuter roadways. The road would create a major visual barrier, a great stripe filled with cars across an otherwise magnificent landscape. The visual barrier would be even more unsightly if the right of way were used for parking, as the loop road in Zilker is used.

The pedestrian and vehicular circulation pattern is one of the principal components of EDAA's park design. Several major pedestrian and bicycle corridors in the park either align with Riverside or cross it, and much of the network of strolling paths is very near the Riverside corridor. Clearly, people out for a relaxing stroll would not choose to take their walk near a commuter roadway. A roadway barrier would inhibit those attending events at the cultural facilities from venturing into the northern part of the park. And the strong connections that could be provided between the southern part of the park and the Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail would be broken, just as they are between the two halves of Zilker Park.

A significant roadway through a park poses obvious safety problems, too. These would be exacerbated by using the right of way for parking, since vehicles these days are so large that visual penetration is impossible. There is no way for a driver to see when people might be emerging from between parked vehicles, and no way for those emerging to inspect the road they are about to cross without stepping into it. Using the right of way for bus parking would compound the problem.

In short, keeping Riverside would cause all the problems of cut-through traffic, but in this case the neighborhood would be a park and the problems would be magnified because the roadway is a high-capacity commuter road rather than a neighborhood street.

On the other hand, removing the roadway removes all these problems and allows for the realization of the wonderful park plan that EDAA has devised. The roughly 25-30 acres of usable parkland south of Riverside would be unified with the 32 acres on the north, to

create a magnificent expanse we could rightly call our central park, and the tremendous potential would generate the excitement to develop the park accordingly.

Why not close Riverside Drive?

The obvious question is whether doing so would put the area roadway grid under undue stress. Some people have reacted with alarm and dire predictions of the impact of the closure. Given the amount of time we all spend tied up in traffic, this concern is understandable. The stakeholders have been concerned about this issue from the very outset and commissioned two traffic studies from WHM Transportation Engineering Consultants to determine the impact closing Riverside or reducing it to one-way westbound.

The park-related benefits of closing the road were obvious. The question was whether the closure would be feasible. The intuition was that Riverside was lightly used, carrying only 20% of the volume of Barton Springs Road. The one-way option was motivated by the fact that more than 75% of Riverside's traffic is westbound, the eastbound flow having been reduced when the left turn lane off southbound Lamar was closed.

The first study, conducted before the design charette, used current traffic loads and those projected to be generated by the park and cultural facilities, and focused on whether the closure and various access configurations would degrade service on South First or Barton Springs Road or cause an increase in cut-through traffic in the Bouldin neighborhood. The study determined that the cut-through impact would be negligible and that even with Riverside closed, there would be no unacceptable degradation of service on South First or Barton Springs Road. Given the location chosen for the civic center and garage, the impact of closing the eastbound lanes on Riverside was virtually negligible. WHM stated that traffic flow would best be served by retaining one westbound lane of Riverside, but this recommendation was made on the basis of traffic impact only and needed to be balanced against other objectives of the project. Moreover, WHM stated that closing the roadway entirely would be feasible and would not result in any unacceptable degradation of service.

But the stakeholders, reflecting the concerns of the public, needed more assurance than that. We recognized a number of major new developments were proposed for downtown and the area just south of Town Lake, that the traffic impact of the new airport had not been factored in, and that some increase in background traffic load should be anticipated for the future. We also recognized that the impact zone for all of this extended beyond the streets bordering the park.

So our second study accounted for these future demands and expanded the study area to run from Congress Avenue to South Lamar and from Barton Springs Road to Second Street downtown. Using demand projected for the year 2005, the study modeled traffic flow under three scenarios, 1) with Riverside remaining as is, 2) with it open for westbound traffic only, and 3) with it completely closed as per the charette design.

The results were pleasantly surprising:

- . A typical peak hour commute through the area would be lengthened by an average of only 7.4 SECONDS by the complete closure of Riverside Drive, versus leaving Riverside in its current two-way, four-lane configuration. Average traffic speed would be slowed by 0.7 MPH relative to the current configuration.
- . The closure would reduce the load and stacking time on the Lamar Boulevard bridge, providing an extra margin of comfort and forestalling if not forever putting to rest the expense, inconvenience, and architectural impact of widening the historic bridge.
- . The main negative impact would be additional back-ups on Drake Bridge (South First).

But the study did not take into account the potential for mitigating the impact on Drake Bridge. It was pointed out that, when the Congress Avenue bridge was closed for reconstruction, the City had put a reversible lane on Drake Bridge. The consultants confirmed that the reversible lane had greatly alleviated the problems caused by the traffic load at that time, and such a measure would clearly mitigate the additional load that closing Riverside would place on the bridge. Other mitigation measures are possible.

In a nutshell, the traffic impact of closing Riverside would be minimal, if not positive, taking into account the larger issues in play on Lamar. And to the extent that the impact is negative, it could be readily mitigated by some simple, low-cost, tried and true traffic management strategies.

The main remaining issue that has surfaced regarding Riverside is how to effectively manage the unloading of large numbers of school buses for youth-oriented events at the performing arts center. The stakeholders will be working on this problem, and I am confident that there are solutions that do not require Riverside right of way to extend through the park.

Weighing the Costs and Benefits

So the answer to "Why?" is to create a great park when we could not otherwise. The answer to "Why not?" is no reason that cannot be readily overcome.

There is some talk of doing a reality check on the traffic modelling before we take the ultimate step of tearing up the asphalt. That would be to do a trial closing to see how it actually works. During the closing, various mitigation measures could be tried out, hopefully for long enough for people to adapt to them as they would to any permanent change. To some extent, this makes sense. The only downsides would be the expense of doing the study and putting various mitigation measures in place temporarily. The risk would be an improperly conducted study, where changes were not appropriately publicized or smoothly conducted, were not in place long enough to determine their ultimate utility, or were changed so often that a lingering sense of confusion pervaded the whole experiment. Perhaps it would be worth doing, perhaps not.

But given that a fairly rigorous analysis has shown the problems to be minimal, we should be mindful that by looking too closely at them or by not being satisfied unless the downside is absolutely zero, we may forget the big picture.

In a traffic sense, we can view the park project as we would any other development, except that its traffic impact results from removing capacity rather than increasing supply. To object that new construction projects coming on line downtown will increase traffic, and therefore we should keep the road is to take the position that those commercial projects should be allowed to proceed, but the park project should not, even though the effects of the projects on traffic are similar. What would that say about our values?

We like to consider Austin a world-class city and compare ourselves favorably to other great cities. Consider the case of Portland, Oregon, a city in some ways like our own. The people of Portland recognized the potential value of their downtown Willamette River waterfront was being compromised by their riverside expressway. They understood that a riverfront park was a more appropriate use of the land and would be of greater value to their community. So they spent on the order of \$160 million to destroy the expressway and establish the park that now graces their downtown waterfront.

The Willamette River in downtown Portland has nothing over Town Lake. Town Lake Park, as envisioned in EDAW's master plan, can anchor the Town Lake Greenbelt and become the central park this city has never had and very much deserves. The only physical barrier is not an expressway, but an underutilized street that carries not that much more traffic than many neighborhood collector streets. If Portland could do what they did, we ought to be able to do what we need to do without breaking a Central Texas sweat.

I urge you all to contact your City Councilmembers and urge them to concur with EDAW in their recommendation to close Riverside Drive as a component of developing Town Lake Park.