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# CRESTVIEW

## NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

### NEWSLETTER

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NOVEMBER 2020

## Capital Metro's Rail Plan: Project Connect or Disconnected?

By Gonzalo Barrientos

*(Gonzalo Barrientos is Chairman of Voices of Austin. He served as Austin's State Senator from 1985 to 2007, and State Representative from 1975 to 1985. Voices of Austin is a community-based nonprofit organization focusing on public issues. It is not a political action committee, nor affiliated with any political party or campaign.)*



On November 3, Austin taxpayers will be asked to approve \$7.1-billion in taxes for Project Connect, a massive expansion of Capital Metro's rail system. As Senate sponsor of the legislation that created Capital Metro, I have a particularly strong interest in this expansion.

It all sounds very reasonable — at first. Austin has nearly a million residents. We're the eleventh largest city in the United States. However, today, many of our citizens are struggling to pay their rent or mortgage, and cover basic necessities. Is this the time to charge ahead with a very expensive major railroad system? Does that very expensive commuter rail system offer the most efficient means for our residents to move around the city? We don't really know. Capital Metro has not yet conducted a comprehensive study on Project Connect that addresses whether it will reduce traffic congestion.

Austin has developed with suburban-style residential areas. Instead of block after block of high-density apartments and condos, go just a few blocks in any direction from the heart of the business district and you're in neighborhoods filled with homes, yards and green areas. Apartments and condominiums line many of the major boulevards bordering these family neighborhoods. And the boulevards handle their denser populations and heavier traffic with more traffic lanes, and with buses, not train tracks. This development pattern has made Austin a very livable community.

Many other cities with metro area populations of more than a million have decided there are much better alternatives than commuter rail systems. San Antonio, Tampa Bay-St. Petersburg, FL, Indianapolis, IN, Columbus, OH, Raleigh-Durham, NC, Oklahoma City, Memphis, TN, Richmond, VA, Louisville, KY and Rochester, NY have all opted for more efficient, more flexible and much less expensive alternatives to metro or light rail systems.

Despite that, and without a careful and wide-ranging study to determine what sort of public transportation system would be best for Austin in the future, our City Council signed on to

Capital Metro's 'Project Connect.'

There has never been a comprehensive transportation analysis. Is a very expensive train system the most efficient way to transport Austin commuters? What about a fleet of various sized buses, from huge double-coach vehicles for major routes, to smaller vehicles—like motorized trollies—for neighborhood routes? These have worked very well in San Antonio for decades.

Instead, homeowners and renters alike are being asked to pay \$7.1-billion to construct additional rail lines. According to the legally-required Notice of Public Hearing on Tax Increases, Project Connect would require an increase of 24.6% on the average homestead. The property tax rate hike on rental properties would average 26.2%, which means rent goes up for their residents.

Capital Metro says they'll wait until after the tax passes to conduct detailed environmental impact studies, even though their plans include an extensive rail tunnel, an underground station in the downtown area, and a rail line under Lady Bird Lake that will eventually head east to the airport. One problem is the underground streams that run beneath Austin's business district. No-one knows precisely where they flow, or how they would impact excavation and heavy construction.

There is also no mention of engineering studies for Project Connect until the tax is passed and construction actually begins. No one knows exactly what they'd find when they start digging. When the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority excavated to build MoPac's toll lanes west of downtown, construction collided with unknown underground geological formations. Costs and construction time went way up.

Capital Metro promised federal funds would cover large parts of the costs for their Red Line, which runs down the eastern edge of downtown. Yet, according to the July 2011 Texas Sunset Commission Final Report, Project Redline went

*See Project Connect, continued on page 2*



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## NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

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Published monthly on 100% recycled paper by the  
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CNA General Meetings are held the second  
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**Quote: Gore Vidal: "Fifty percent of people won't vote, and fifty percent don't read newspapers. I hope it's the same fifty percent."**

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*Project Connect, continued from page 1*

233% over budget and received not one federal dollar. Capital Metro later admitted that it had actually never sought federal funds. Austin residents paid for the entire system. Are we looking at that same sequence again? Only this time, for a lot more money?

The November election would authorize the City of Austin to raise taxes for Project Connect, even though the city's bond (credit) rating was recently lowered. This would take a lot of money from Austin homeowners, with an average 24.6% hike in city property taxes, and 26.2% increase for renters, to pay for the trains.

When asked why the City of Austin and Capital Metro did not perform comprehensive studies to determine what kind of public transportation system we'll need and what it would cost, an attorney for Capital Metro stated that there would be "no traffic, environmental or property studies" unless the project was approved. Why in the world wouldn't a comprehensive study be conducted before we start building it.

Could any of the answers be in the interests that have contributed heavily to the Campaign PAC to pass Project Connect? Here are the larger contributors to Project Connect based on the October 3 filing:

- HNTB Transportation Engineering firm \$155,000
- Austin FC (Soccer club off north MOPAC with a rail stop planned at its stadium) \$100,000
- Brandywine Operating Partnership \$100,000
- Endeavour Real Estate Group \$100,000
- HDR Engineering Transportation Engineering \$60,000
- Tyson Tuttle High Tech Promoter \$10,526.63
- Presidium Group (Real estate firm) \$30,000

These seven, all with a financial interest in Project Connect or CodeNEXT, except one, account for \$555,526.63, or 64%, of Project Connect's corporate donations, and 57% of all contributions.

Most reasonable people are not opposed to a well-planned, well-engineered mass transit system in Austin. Project Connect just isn't it.

*For the article with source citations or for more information, go to*  
<https://voicesofaustin.org/news/>

## It's Not Too Early to Renew Your 2021 CNA Membership Dues (or join as a new member)

Since the early 1980's when the Crestview Neighborhood Association was formed, CNA has been dedicated to preserving our neighborhood as a safe, livable place for its residents. To join the association or to renew your dues through December 2021, use the form below. Make checks out to Crestview Neighborhood Association or CNA. Or you can use PayPay by going to

<https://crestviewna.com/join/>



Crestview Neighborhood Association  
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All residents are invited to join  
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## Howdy Neighbor!

By Mike Lavigne, CNA President

Let me begin by complimenting your Halloween Yard displays this year. My daughter is enjoying walks and bike rides to check out the daily additions to your ghoulishly gharrish ghosts and goblins! It certainly bodes well for what's to come for the holidays.

I've never been the superstitious type but I'm afraid I may have jinxed something. Remember the entitlement deal we had in place with the future developer of the large shopping center on Burnet Road where the Kolache Shop and The Local Post are? Well, the deal between the developer and the owner of the property fell through and the case has been withdrawn.

I'm frustrated but still proud of the work we did on that case, and it set a good precedent of working with pending development to fashion it into better fitting products. But the way the city is set up, properties that are under contract become zoning cases before the land actually trades hands. This means that the rug can be pulled from under us at any time if the seller balks. I don't know what the future holds for that property now. It is frustrating that our volunteer team and neighbors can spend so much time and energy on something only for it to disintegrate due to no fault of ours or the party we are working with. We have limited capacity to negotiate as it is, and these cases aren't getting easier. I appreciate your patience and input, and we'll just move on to the next one.

### Elections

The two biggest local things on our ballot this year are the District 7 City Council Seat and the Prop A election for the new transit plan and tax hike. In the City Council Election, our friend Leslie Pool is running for reelection against a little known challenger, Morgan Witt. I've never met or talked to

Witt, and she's never been to one of our meetings. I know Leslie very well, and she's been highly responsive to our neighbors on a host of issues whenever called upon.

On Prop A, there's plenty of info in this edition to base your opinion on. I know it means more than \$700 dollars a year in new taxes for our household. So that definitely weighs heavy on my mind.

I appreciate y'all reading this. It means a lot to me when you find me and let me know what you did or didn't like about my words here. Plenty of folks stop me when I'm slinging' frosé at the clubhouse to let me know their thoughts, and I love it!

I'll be at the Violet Crown Clubhouse for coffee on Wednesday mornings at 10am and Thursday evenings for frosé and usually Saturday nights as well, so please feel free to come by and ask me anything or share your thoughts. I'm also easy to find via email at <https://crestviewna.com/contact/>, so don't be a stranger!

## Saving Water in Winter Saves All Year Long

Your water meter measures your monthly water use, but there is no meter on your wastewater line. To calculate your wastewater fee, Austin Water monitors your water usage during three consecutive winter billing periods between mid-November and mid-March and bases the fee on the daily average. You can lower your wastewater costs for the next year by conserving water use during these billing periods.

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## Fact Checking the Project Connect Ads

By now you have probably seen several ads and mailers for Project Connect (Proposition A) on the November 3rd ballot. The flyers are pretty; the graphics are professional. But how accurate and informative are they? We have done a bit of fact checking to try to answer that question.

- Claim: The cost for the median taxpayer will be 78 cents a day, just a 4% increase on your total property tax bill.

This claim tries to minimize the cost of the project (at this time we have no idea of the final cost involved) by breaking it down to the smallest increments possible. 78 cents a day – but for how long? The answer is this a permanent tax increase. How much will this go up as your home increases in value as most homes in Austin have? And what if you don't have a median priced home? As for the 4%, while it is technically true that your total bill might go up 4%, the city portion of your taxes will increase about 20% this year for Prop A. The opposition to Prop A have claimed the increase is 25%, however, this includes the 3.6% tax increase that the city has already approved. Seniors would not be immune from this permanent tax increase as city taxes are not frozen like they are for the school district. (If you are interested in a dollar amount of how much your total city taxes will go up this year for both Prop A and the city tax increase, you can go to the Travis County Appraisal District website and compare your taxes from last year to this year as TCAD has already calculated the amount including the 8.75 cent increase to fund Project Connect.)

- Claims: A vote for Proposition A will help Austinites stay in their homes.
  - Innovative strategy to help folks stay in their homes around stations and along transit lines.
- Studies have shown that the value of property along

rail lines generally increases. Many Austinites are already struggling to pay the taxes on their homes, and in fact some have had to leave the city for just that reason. The permanent tax created by Prop A will make it all the more difficult for citizens such as seniors, people on fixed incomes, essential workers, teachers and individuals in food service. Renters will not be spared as landlords pass these additional expenses on to them. There is no explanation of what those “innovative strategies” might be to help folks stay in their homes. If one looks at the trends in the city now, such as those proposed by CodeNEXT, these strategies seem to be to push people out of their homes so that developers can build market rate high rise apartment buildings, and invite people to rent/buy back in.

- Claim: Prop A will relax traffic by adding hundreds of thousands of boardings a day. Prop A will get people out of their cars.

“Relax” traffic? What exactly does that mean? In fact, there have been no studies to indicate what the actual impact the rail would have on traffic counts and what the traffic flow would be. Nor have there been any studies of what the actual ridership would be. Prop A may get some people out of their cars, but will it be enough to have a bona fide effect on traffic and to justify the cost? The Red Line was heavily promoted with similar promises that did not become a reality.

- Claim: With three new rail lines, a downtown tunnel, a system of neighborhood circulators and upgraded bus service, Project Connect ties together.... pretty much all of Austin.

First, the tunnel – there have not yet been any engineering studies done to assess what would be involved in tunneling under downtown. What geological obstacles would there be to overcome, and what would the potential cost overruns be to do that? (Remember the Waller Creek Tunnel Project fiasco? And that wasn't nearly as involved as this would be.)

See Fact Checking, continued on page 5



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As for the neighborhood circulators, many residents of east Austin have complained that these circulators would not actually transport people to the destinations that the people in the community could use and that the dollar amount apportioned to these is not significant. In fact, CapMetro is allocating only \$1.5 million out of \$7.1 billion for neighborhood circulators, or 0.02 percent of the initial investment phase. They would rather see the bus system overhauled, something they have desired for some time. They would certainly beg to differ that Prop A will connect them to pretty much all of Austin. Jim Duncan, Austin's former Development Services director, stated in a Statesman commentary that the proposed routes are geographically unbalanced. He said: "None of the major transit routes would directly serve anyone west of MoPac or in southeast or southwest Austin." Some neighborhoods, such as Crestview and Brentwood, would not even have circulators as one CapMetro spokesperson revealed in a recent neighborhood meeting. \*\*\*\*\*

#### CodeNext Update: CodeNext and the Council Elections

Currently a majority of our City Council has shown overwhelming support for CodeNEXT, the massive overhaul of the city's zoning code that would allow accelerated densification of our neighborhoods, has displayed a dismissive attitude towards neighborhood plans and deed restrictions and has not supported property protest rights for all rezonings. Only Councilmembers Alter, Kitchen, Pool and Tovo have stood in our corner. As Crestviewites, the only council race we can vote in is the race for District 7. Incumbent Leslie Pool is being challenged by Morgan Witt. On Witt's website she says she wants to, "Permit a diversity of housing options (ADUs, fourplexes, multi-family apartments, and multi-unit dwellings) in Austin's central neighborhoods" and "End mandatory minimum parking requirements for new construction". That sounds like support for CodeNEXT.

## Crestview Zoning Cases Update

### 7113 Burnet Road

This zoning change request, from office and commercial use to multi-family, was approved by the City Council on August 27 on the first of three readings. However, an attorney representing the Ronan Corporation, the property owner, submitted a letter to the city in early October formally requesting that the zoning case be withdrawn. As a result, the current zoning will remain in place. CNA had invested significant time negotiating with the applicant's agent to ensure specific protections for the single-family homes abutting the proposed apartment complex whose zoning application, if approved, would have allowed a 90 foot tall building on the property. Specifically, the association had worked out an agreement to be formally adopted as a restrictive covenant that would establish building setback zones and height limitations resulting in those apartments closest to the single-family homes to be no more than three stories in height.

### 902 & 904 Morrow

This case was heard by the Planning Commission on October 13th, and they approved recommending MF-1 zoning to the City Council who will consider the case on November 12th. The owner of this currently zoned single-family (SF-3) property is requesting an upzoning to multi-family (MF-1). This case involves two properties, 902 Morrow, currently a vacant, tree covered lot that is roughly 1/2 acre in size, and 904 Morrow, a quarter-acre lot with an existing single-family house. Some of the issues involved in this case include respecting the neighborhood plan, increased traffic on Morrow (a narrow, 30 foot wide street with predominately single-family homes) and environmental and flooding issues resulting from increasing the allowable impervious cover from 45% under SF-3 to 55% under MF-1. Eliminating single-family zoning will continue to contribute to the gentrification of the neighborhood.

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