



February 9, 2010 (text in green modified 2/14/10)

To the Urban Transportation Commission, the Planning Commission, and Austin City Council,

Introduction

In recent letters and statements to some commissions, boards, and city council, some questionable points have been made by the opposition against the Nueces Bike Blvd. I am writing today (and have been for a few days, because of the extent of the misinformation) to offer some counter points. While you may have found some of the opposition's points as clearly misinformed, some are certainly valid skepticism and need to be addressed with valid counterarguments. Should any of the opposition's arguments still be unaddressed in your mind after reading my letter, please do not hesitate to contact me for my further thoughts. There is a lot of fear being expressed in this public process. My hope is that we can discuss each point in a sincere manner.

At this stage, the concerns of the opponents of the Nueces Bicycle Boulevard project can be roughly split into the following categories:

- a) There are not enough bicyclists to warrant special accommodation.
- b) Traffic problems will increase and (motor vehicle) access will be reduced.
- c) Future increasing downtown density will require more motor vehicle trips.
- d) Property values will decrease and redevelopment prospects will be hurt.
- e) Commerce will be hurt.
- f) The process has ignored the needs of people along Nueces Street and others.

Below, I will address each of the concerns, as they fall into each category. Again, there are many, many points to address, so any attempt to address these concerns will necessitate a long response. I have attempted to keep my responses as brief as possible, so I have chosen to use a bullet-point format.

I will note that this is certainly not a two-sided issue. There is also some interest in having a bike boulevard on Rio Grande St. *instead* of Nueces St. There are many reasons to favor Nueces St., but I will not go into those reasons here. Further information is available on our website at <http://lobv.org/nueces/>. However, be rest assured that I and others in support of a Nueces St. alignment are working with the pro- Rio Grande contingent to address their concerns as well.

I am not attempting to mis-characterize any of the opposition's arguments. If it appears that I have misunderstood their concerns, please let me know so that I can properly address their concerns.

Opposition Concern A: "There are not enough bicyclists to warrant special accommodation."

Opposition says: Only 1% of population commutes by bike.

Response:

- But this is a strong indicator that we need a bike boulevard -- to increase the number of bicyclists
- Some people will bike anyway; the point of a bike boulevard system is to get new people biking.
- Also, the 1% figure is:
 - out of date (from 2000). The most recent figure (2008?) is about 1.5%.
 - city-wide, whereas preliminary counts show around 8% modal split for bicycles on Nueces St. (when UT and ACC were out of session).
 - of limited scope. The figure only considers about 1/2 of the population of Austin, i.e. when each transportation mode is added together, the 100% refers to about 350,000 people. It does not include a) UT, ACC, or any other students going to class, b) anyone under the age of 16, c) those who bus & bike to work, d) self-employed, e) those who commute by bike less than half of the time, e.g. it excludes at least one business owner on Nueces who states that she does commute by bike sometimes. Other subsets of bicycling Austin are also not included in the narrow U.S. Census "Journey To Work" figure.
 - Note that there are 8,000 people who have bicycles registered at UT alone. This number itself constitutes over 1% of the Austin population. Of course, there are many people on bicycle in Austin who have no association with UT, so the total number of active bicyclists in Austin is clearly well above 1%.

O: 98%+ of Austinites use a car for their transportation.

95% of people use cars.

R:

- This pattern is not sustainable and that is why Austin is working to provide alternatives. Bike facilities are built to meet latent demand.
- This facility is meant to meet unmet demand for bicycling and pedestrians facilities. The current modal split is relevant as a benchmark and as an indicator for potential, but the point of this project is to increase bicycle and pedestrian modal split.

O: Climate and mobility needs will continue to favor automobiles.

R: Yet, when given a safe and convenient choice, more and more Austinites are choosing to go by bike. The city is working to meet the unmet demand for bicycling facilities. The bike boulevard helps provide a mobility choice that is not yet available to many Austinites.

O: Want mobility for EVERYONE.

R: So do we. That's the point. There needs to be safe access for various people to get around by bicycle. People should have the freedom to choose. A bicycle boulevard along Nueces St. provides one link in a system of safety corridors that serves Austinites who are currently shut out of our transportation system.

Many residents of lower socio-economic backgrounds rely on a bicycle for transportation since many are one-car or no-car families. The bicycle boulevard facility adds an important component to Austin's bicycle network, which the city has invested in over the last ten years, especially over the last three years. With more bicyclists using the network, all types of bicyclists are safer, especially this group, sometimes referred to as the "invisible cyclists" because they bike to blue collar and/or service industry jobs at odd hours.

The project is important to the vitality of ACC and UT. Bicycling is the only timely and affordable way for a majority of students to travel between the campuses (UT and ACC Rio Grande campuses). UT and ACC are major economic stimuli for the community. Student mobility should be a priority for the city. Note that city project planners are in discussion with representatives from ACC and UT to ensure this project meets this end. Nueces St. provides a good bicycle connection for UT residents in west Austin at Colorado, Brackenridge, and Gateway apartments traveling to and from the main UT campus. Making Nueces even better for bicyclists would create access to more of the UT community to travel to and from UT by bike.

Opposition Concern B: *"Traffic problems will increase and (motor vehicle) access will be reduced."*

O: 1.3M car trips on Nueces each year.

R: Counting trips per year is not a typical figure to use. Using the commonly used Average Daily Trips (ADT), Nueces St. sees about 3,500 motorist ADT. By using a yearly figure, the opposition is sensationalizing the current amount of traffic on Nueces to make it seem abundant. Nearby north-south arterials Lavaca, Guadalupe, and Lamar see about ten times as much traffic each. Rush-hour-only counts show a similar ratio.

O: Stress on adjacent streets.

R: The partial shift of motor vehicle traffic off of Nueces St. for a bike boulevard can be absorbed easily by adjacent streets. See figures above.

O: Nueces on a road diet (in bike plan) has a goal reducing 70% of car traffic.

R:

- A bike boulevard on Nueces St. would have negligible impact, if any, on total *area* automobile trips. The largest reduction in Nueces automobile traffic proposed was from 3,500 ADT to 1,200 ADT.

- Note that bicycle traffic on Nueces will increase with a bike blvd. The city's goals are to improve mobility of *people* -- not just cars in and out of the downtown area.

O: A bike blvd. means reduced access to businesses.

R: Just as with one-way streets, such as Guadalupe, directions can be given to customers to drive around the block to get to the entrance of a building or a parking space.

O: Why Nueces is not good: Wells Fargo drive-thru bank.

R:

- The main entrance to the drive-thru bank is from 15th St. and thus would not be affected by a Nueces Bike Blvd.

- The main exit from the drive-thru bank is onto Nueces St. Neither the city nor the LOBV have proposed restricting this exit in any way.

- The city and the LOBV expect to negotiate specific, localized needs of properties along Nueces St. so that no property is unduly *affected*.

O: Why Nueces is not good: it is the only street that allows a left from westbound MLK between Lavaca and West Sts.

R:

- Only two streets currently prohibit left turns from westbound MLK.

- Left turn access onto Nueces from westbound MLK would not be restricted.

- Other streets in the vicinity have had similar left turn restrictions for decades, e.g. northbound Guadalupe St. between MLK and 28th has no streets that allow a left turn.

O: Why Nueces is not good: would take 1.2 miles of downtown street out of commission.

Many businesses **require** delivery vehicles on Nueces

R: 100% of Nueces St. as a bike blvd. would remain accessible to automobiles and delivery vehicles.
100% of the properties would still have access via automobile and delivery vehicles.

O: Want continued "unimpeded access".

Restricted traffic flow

R:

- Nueces St. is one of many streets in the downtown area. In order to efficiently accommodate as many people and as many transportation modes as possible, some roads are designated in the draft Downtown Plan as bicycle priority -- or automobile or mass transit priority.

- What constitutes unimpeded access is in the eye of the beholder. Most Austinites find themselves impeded by automobile traffic as they make their way around the city on bicycle, on foot, on mass transit, or even in a car themselves. Since Austinites have made it clear that they want improved bicycle access, the city is working toward that goal to meet the needs of its citizens.

O: Shouldn't be at the expense of those using automobiles.

This is a bad idea and bad public policy.

Access -- patients need to get to my business.

R:

- Ideally, we could accommodate bicycle and pedestrian traffic at no expense to automobile traffic. However, even pedestrian crosswalk signals are for the benefit of pedestrians at the expense of motorists.

- Nueces St. was chosen because of its position in a nearly complete street grid system. Rio Grande and San Antonio Sts. provide adequate adjacent access to every location on Nueces St. Numerous intersecting arterials provide more than adequate access to Nueces St. from any part of Austin.

- The effect on automobile mobility and access are minimized since there are numerous alternative routes on adjacent streets. The intent is not to deter automobile traffic, but to facilitate safe, convenient bicycle access to meet Austinites' unmet demand for safe, convenient bicycle facilities.

- There is already precedent in Austin of altering car traffic flow in favor of other transportation modes. The 2nd Street District is a clear example of prioritizing the pedestrian. The Nueces Bike Blvd. project is prioritizing the bicycle mode.

- The traffic component of the draft Downtown Austin Plan specifies that best practice is to designate certain corridors in downtown to be prioritized for specific modes. In this plan, 2nd Street is a pedestrian priority street, and Nueces Street is a bicycle priority street.

- As far back as the late 1990's, the city identified Nueces St. as a bicycle-priority and local-motor-vehicle-access-only street. This designation was made with notable input from great city urban designers such as Sinclair Black, who recently reconfirmed this recommendation at a DAA Transportation & Streetscape Subcommittee meeting.

O: Eliminating stop signs will clog east-west traffic just for the sake of cyclists.

R: The east-west streets will not likely have any serious traffic jams. The crossing streets that truly have significant traffic already have traffic lights. The ones with stop signs experience low levels of traffic and are certainly not arterials. **Also, traffic circles are a tool that could give equal preference to all four directions.** Any serious issue of traffic jams on minor crossing streets can be addressed in the future should it occur.

O: Not opposed to bicycle lanes on Nueces.

R:

- Bike lanes would eliminate half of the on-street parking on Nueces. A bike boulevard would preserve this for offices, residences, and other destinations along Nueces.

- Bike lanes do not yet meet the needs of many Austinites, especially young people, who wish to travel by bicycle. In order to meet Austin's bicycle ridership goals, unmet bicycle demand must be satisfied. A

bicycle boulevard network, of which Nueces St. is a part, is expected to help Austin meet its goals.

- The Bicycle Boulevard or Safety Corridor, as they are called in some places, is the more suitable facility due to the perceived and actual safety improvement over traditional bike lanes. This is important in order to attract more women bicycle commuters, whom are currently in the minority in commuting by bicycle, since "safety" is the top reason cited for not bicycle commuting for short trips. Healthy transportation systems that offer real, safe choices for mobility are characterized by a much more even gender split, i.e. 50/50, among bicycle commuters.

O: Opposed reduction in mobility lanes

Elimination of roadway lanes.

R: No lanes will be removed.

O: A bicycle blvd. will mean further elimination of customer parking.

Loss of street parking.

R: This is misleading. The reduction in on-street parking from a bicycle boulevard will be minimal, likely less than 10%. On the other hand, installation of bike lanes on Nueces St. north of 7th St. would mean the loss of parking on one side of the street.

- Also, a business has the option to provide off-street customer parking at their own expense.

O: The bike boulevard design is such that bike users can gain almost exclusive access to the road.

R: This is simply untrue and is unfounded. The road will be shared between bicycles, automobiles, and other typical road users.

O: Access to driveways will be more difficult on a bike blvd.

R: Driveway access will not be impeded by a bike blvd.

O: Lack of a TIA for the project.

R: City staff already has a good idea of the traffic flow in this area in town. The primary affected street, Nueces St., does not have enough traffic to warrant a specific TIA for the bike blvd. project. However, at this point, a TIA is underway for the project, both for a Nueces St. alignment and a Rio Grande St. alignment.

The bike blvd. project will not reduce system capacity for automobile traffic. What will change is the traffic pattern only. For example, some motorists will choose to take another route, while some bicyclists and pedestrians will choose to now use the street. This is routine -- it is similar to many other projects the city has undertaken. Examples include traffic calming in neighborhoods, the 2nd Street District, and the Cesar Chavez two-way conversion. Drivers learn to navigate the new network -- such a phenomenon is not new.

The issue for the opposition seems to be that this is not a good idea simply because it is being done to create a safe bicycle corridor. We have many precedents for changing traffic patterns for automobiles and for pedestrians. It is reasonable that the city does the same for bicyclists on occasion. There are many, many residents who ride a bicycle in Austin (especially students and low-income residents) and they deserve safe mobility. There are also many people who currently bike infrequently or not at all who would be better served by a transportation system that provides more, safe bicycle corridors (and these people demand better facilities at every opportunity).

Enhancing Austin's bicycle network with a signature, major north-south bicycle facility, to complement the city's investment in the signature, major east-west facility (the Lance Armstrong Bikeway) is the responsible choice for many reasons. Development of the north-south bike route will directly help address challenges the city faces, including future mobility in the urban core and air quality. (Note that Austin is likely to reach non-attainment status with the EPA for air quality, primarily due to automobile emissions.) According to the city's Transportation Director, bicycling will have

noticeable positive impact on our overall traffic congestion problem, while maintaining our unique quality of life.

Opposition Concern C: "Future increasing downtown density will require more motor vehicle trips."

O: Why Nueces is not good: 100% zoned for dense commercial development.

Bad public policy considering the city's interest in increasing density.

Density (not encumbered by capitol view corridor).

Proximity to UT, Capitol, downtown, CBD -- good for commercial development.

R:

- Density requires a multimodal system as it has in other cities. Dense development is a reason to facilitate a multimodal system that includes substantial bicycle and pedestrian components.

- If we continue our current transportation modal split, there is no way to fit that many cars in.

- The many nearby destinations are an important reason to improve bicycle access. The bicycle is a much more effective transportation mode than the automobile for densely built areas such as the UT campus and downtown.

O: Nueces St. is zoned 98% commercial.

R:

- This fact does not preclude a bicycle boulevard.

- This concentration of commercial zoning is no different than much of downtown.

O: Downtown density needs to allow for more vehicle trips.

Density bringing vehicular traffic.

R:

- A bike boulevard on Nueces St. would have minimal **effect** on total area automobile trips. The largest reduction in Nueces automobile traffic proposed was from 3,500 ADT to 1,200 ADT. Considering the hundreds of thousands of ADT on nearby parallel streets from Lavaca St. to Lamar Blvd., **such** a reduction in automobile ADT on Nueces St. would constitute a drop of less than one percent ADT for the area. Similarly, since the drop in ADT is so small when compared to parallel area streets, the other streets will easily absorb any additional automobile traffic not on Nueces St.

- While automobile trips are likely to increase in the future (albeit at a lower rate of increase than other modes), the nearby arterials will need to take on the increase in automobile trips.

- A major reason for the Nueces Bike Blvd. is to facilitate the unmet Austin demand for a more multimodal city, especially in the downtown area. A higher density of destinations requires a more agile mix of urban transportation that favors bicycle, pedestrian, and mass transit use more than our current roads offer. The Nueces Bike Blvd. is a project with the future in mind.

Opposition Concern D: "Property values will decrease and redevelopment prospects will be hurt."

O: Would stifle investment in those properties.

Negative economic impact on property values.

R:

- If anything, a traffic calmed, bicycle boulevard would increase the investment potential and property values of residential or commercial property. (Some exceptions would be heavy industrial land uses and automobile services, e.g. a car mechanic or gas station.)

- Some research points out the economic benefits of traffic-calmed streets, e.g. bike boulevards:

<http://tinyurl.com/bike-blvd-economics>

(<http://austinontwowheels.org/2009/12/22/the-economics-of-bike-boulevards-debunking-the->

[myth-that-bike-infrastructure-will-hurt-business/](#))

- Note that on the other side of downtown Austin on traffic-calmed Rainey Street, which includes speed humps, traffic circles, and partial diverters, we see that redevelopment can certainly occur on traffic-calmed streets. Highrises are going up and numerous houses are being transformed into commercial properties.

O: Property taxes have gone up 95% in the last ten years -- should it be made any more difficult for businesses?

R: Here the argument goes the other way. Increasing property values (and the taxes tied to them) are increasing and that's a bad thing, but elsewhere, the same people complain about decreasing property values.

The opposition's argument that the project would make future redevelopment in the downtown area harder or more expensive is not true. Most redevelopment in the Northwest District of downtown does not produce enough traffic to trigger a TIA. A nearby example is the active site plan for 7th & Rio Grande -- 7,500 sq. ft. of retail and about 160 residential units -- which will produce about 1800 trips, not enough to trigger a TIA. (Note that this area of downtown is not eligible for the Density Bonus program and has limited CBD and DMU/CURE zoning.)

Similarly, the 1000-2000 car trips that may move off of Nueces St. to elsewhere in the downtown grid is not enough to affect a TIA analysis. As mentioned before, the city has hired an independent traffic consultant to confirm this. The analysis is due to be complete by the week of February 18th, according to CoA public works staff. Now that a TIA is being done for the project, the results could serve as the TIA for that area of downtown, saving developers the cost of doing one for development in that area.

There is some irony in the opposition's argument. If/When a large development is implemented on Nueces St. and thus creates more traffic, that traffic would do the same thing to the network that the opposition is saying the Nueces Bike Blvd. project would do. So, would it not be okay for a public good / public interest project to have a similar result on traffic patterns? Indeed, at least some minimal analysis is warranted to assess the impact of the traffic redistribution from the bike project. However, Nueces is not a critical street to the broader transportation grid. If the proposal were for traffic calming on Lamar Blvd. or Lavaca St., the concern would be real and significant.

Lastly, the vision of the draft Downtown Plan for the Northwest District of downtown is more residents. This project helps preserve the calmness of the area, moving towards that goal.

In 2007 the City of Austin received a Silver Level Bicycle Friendly City award from the League of American Bicyclists, an accolade that has put Austin on the map nationally for tourism and attention. Such positive attention is important for keeping cities vibrant. Many national travel publications feature Austin for its outdoors activities and bicycle friendliness. The city must periodically reapply for the Bicycle Friendly City award, which assesses not only current conditions for bicycling, but also assesses what positive progress the city continues to make.

During the Austin 2009 Bicycle Master Plan public hearing process, over 400 residents attended the City Council meetings, and many others wrote in support of the plan. Many of them cited as goal that the city should work toward becoming a Gold-rated community. A system of bike boulevards would be an integral part of a successful application in upgrading Austin's status.

Opposition Concern E: "Commerce will be hurt."

O: Drive-by traffic would be reduced, thus reducing business exposure.

R:

- This project is not a precedent for traffic calming in Austin. Numerous traffic calming projects exist in mixed-use districts of Austin, including Duval St., West Lynn St., Rainey St., W. 2nd St., and The Domain. The Town Center mixed-use district at Mueller is on track to incorporate traffic calming

measures.

- The nature of businesses along Nueces is predominantly professional services or other offices that do not depend on random drive-by traffic in any substantial way for their business.
- Intersecting arterial streets will continue to provide drive-by traffic exposure to the Nueces business located on arterials.
- Bicycle, pedestrian, and slower moving automobile traffic are much more likely to be attracted as customers than fast-moving motorists who have little or no time to look to the side of the road. The 2nd Street District and The Domain offer examples of this.

Opposition Concern F: *"The process has ignored the needs of people along Nueces Street and others."*

O: Why Nueces is not good: fire station.

R: The city public works department has already negotiated with the fire department to meet their needs. This is a non-issue at this point.

O: Why Nueces is not good: Travis County jail.

R: The city public works department has already negotiated with Travis County at the appropriate levels to meet the needs of the jail. This is also a non-issue at this point.

O: Why Nueces is not good: major bus route.

R: The city public works department has already negotiated with Capital Metro (the relevant bus service provider) to meet their needs. This is a non-issue at this point.

O: The whole thing was proposed without the input of the business community.

R:

- This project has been a component of many planning efforts that included public involvement.
- The Downtown Austin Alliance has been involved in the process for some time now.
- The city had always planned a public process specific to the Nueces Bike Blvd. proposal. The first public meeting devoted to the project was in December.
- Nueces St. has been specified as a bicycle corridor for over ten years, according to city plans created with public input, including the business community.

The city's bicycle program staff in the recent past has an excellent record of finding solutions, for thinking outside of the box. If they can soundly address the disparate concerns raised by various interest groups, then it is in the public's best interest to have such a solution supported by City Council and upper city management. The bike program staff is listening to all stakeholders and incorporating potential solutions to their concerns into the development of this project.

Conclusion

I have addressed each of the opposition's concerns as I understand them. If I have left any concern unaddressed, please let me know so that I can return to address them.

The Austin community stands behind bicycle and pedestrian facility improvement projects. As a leadership organization dedicated to meeting this demand for bicycling facilities in Austin, the League of Bicycling Voters is helping the voices in support of this project to speak out. Our petition in support of the Nueces Bike Boulevard is well on its way to gathering the explicit support of 1,000 Austin voters. In addition to addressing the opposition's specific concerns head-on, we hope that by showing the strong Austin support for this facility that the opposition will also realize the benefit of creating another

popular facility and destination in Austin.

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