



## Advocacy Agenda FY 2023 - 2024

Adopted by the Downtown Austin Alliance  
Board of Directors on October 11, 2023

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### Overview

The mission of the Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA) is to create, preserve and enhance the vibe, vitality, and value of Downtown Austin for everyone. To achieve this vision, DAA must engage and influence policy at all levels of government. Each of its strategic policy objectives is aligned to federal, state, and local policies. This Advocacy Agenda outlines our primary advocacy priorities for FY 23-24 as specified as an objective in our Strategic Plan.

### Advocacy Priorities

#### Public Space Experience

##### **Increase the number of emergency shelter beds by 500 system-wide.**

- The complexity of homelessness requires an effective system involving many strategies coordinated by large and diverse collaborations between public, private and nonprofit partners. The system must help prevent homelessness and provide key services such as outreach, emergency shelter, temporary housing, and permanent supportive housing (PSH). While the community and policymakers have made progress on new PSH developments, we continue to lack a high-functioning system. There remains a critical shortage of emergency shelter beds, leaving many unsheltered residents exposed to extreme weather, lack of services, and a safe place to sleep. Increased “front-end-of-the-system” resources facilitate getting people into the system and on a faster track to resolving their homelessness, which is better for the individuals and the community.

##### **Launch a Mental Health Diversion Center Pilot.**

- A mental health diversion center can provide offenders suffering from mental health issues with an alternative path other than jail. Based on recent successes of mental health diversion centers in Nashville, Miami, Tucson and other cities, a mental health diversion center will redirect individuals to the mental health treatment resources they need. Mental health diversion centers provide a pathway to recovery, reduce the need for a criminal justice response to a mental health issue, and provide better outcomes. We support a collaborative funding and operating model among Travis County, the City of Austin, and other providers to launch a pilot that leverages existing but bolstered mental health services and facilities. A pilot should be the pathway toward a diversion program that is fully integrated into the public health and criminal justice spheres. The pilot must capture complete and accurate metrics to have an immediate, positive impact on public safety and to inform the design of a permanent diversion center facility and operating model.

### **Public Safety**

#### **Launch an Alternative Response Pilot.**

- The police, EMS (Emergency Medical Services), and 911 should not be the first and only ways to address non-crime issues related to people experiencing homelessness or non-threatening public behavior issues. There is a desperate need for an alternative response team to actively engage people in need, to help prevent crises from occurring, and to quickly initiate assistance to people who are decompensating in the public space. This team of well-trained practitioners provides a “go-to resource” that more effectively engages people in need. This also maximizes diminishing police resources, advances people toward the services they need and dovetails well with new mental health diversion resources coming online. The pilot will inform decisions on implementing a long-term, scalable program moving forward.

#### **Advocate for more community policing downtown by city, county, and state agencies.**

- Diminishing police resources has had a significant impact on public safety and the perceptions of safety at all times of day. Across all Austin Police Department (APD) sectors, patrol shifts are understaffed. Specialized police units such as the Downtown District Representatives, detectives, and Street Response Team can no longer be staffed. Plans must be developed and quickly implemented to address immediate safety needs downtown, as well as the long-term staffing issue. Downtown needs frequent, consistent, and highly visible police presence at all times of day and night. Advocacy needs to extend beyond the City and APD to gain support from other agencies, such as DPS, Travis County Sheriff’s Office, and Constables.

### **Active Urbanism**

#### **Complete and integrate the Our Future 35 (Cap & Stitch) vision and design with TxDOT’s highway procurement.**

- DAA urges the City of Austin to expeditiously continue momentum on the design and funding strategy for Our Future 35 and aggressively seek out federal funding to ensure this project becomes a reality. I-35 is undergoing its first redesign in over 50 years, lowering the upper decks and increasing city-wide east-west connectivity. The Our Future 35 Cap and Stitch Program gives us the chance to unlock environmental, social, and development potential for community benefit. Our Future 35 is a transformational program of projects that encompasses years of community stakeholder outreach. The program seeks to create land-bridging that unites the historic neighborhoods and elementary schools of East Austin with nearby destinations such as the Mexican-American Cultural Center and Heritage Corridor, Waterloo Greenway, Palm Park and School, the Austin Convention Center, and the Downtown’s historic entertainment district, Plaza Saltillo and Project Connect transit-oriented (re)development.
- Without a proactive funding strategy, we will not be able to deliver these world-class projects that will be quintessentially Austin and tell the history and culture of our city.
- DAA stands ready to support all funding opportunities through public testimony, letters, and federal office visits.

**Ensure that plans for the South-Central Waterfront are maximized for an engaging and accessible world-class waterfront experience and for activation, programming and placemaking with the Downtown Austin Alliance and partners at the table.**

- The South-Central Waterfront will not only add to our growing skyline but will provide signature waterfront green space, enhance future light rail stations, and provide additional live/work/play space for Austin residents and visitors alike. This district offers a unique opportunity for transit-oriented development downtown and this should be a key consideration in its buildout. This will require creative planning and partnerships that encompass multiple city departments, public agencies, and community stakeholders.
- We urge the City of Austin to advance the policy, code, and funding frameworks to allow this district to build out to support transit.
- We also call for a visionary and inclusive planning and design process for the waterfront park spaces in the district – to ensure that they contain some of the most beautiful and iconic waterfront public space spaces in our downtown.

### **Built Environment**

**Adopt land development code or policy changes that support downtown's growth while preserving our unique assets.**

- Land use and/or policy changes should balance growing downtown's density while also protecting and/or improving historic buildings, cultural venues, parks and public spaces, affordability, and quality of life. Our efforts this year will focus on improving existing land-use policies such as the density bonus program; partnering with cultural and historic preservation leaders to develop and advocate for meaningful incentives to preserve historic places and cultural venues; and advocating for policies that improve the public realm conditions in downtown, such as street trees.

**Adopt The Palm District Plan and set it up for implementation.**

- The Palm District encompasses the eastern third of downtown and includes existing and future development, including: I-35 Capital Central Express, Our Future 35 Cap & Stitch, Waterloo Greenway, Project Connect, Palm School, the Mexican American Cultural Center, and the Austin Convention Center. Our efforts this year will be to support the adoption of the final plan at City Council and ensure a path forward includes a strong leadership structure with adequate resources for successful implementation.

**Advance plans for the expansion of the Austin Convention Center.**

- We support an expanded Austin Convention Center that will transform the area with safe, active, and vibrant ground-floor experiences and should leverage investment opportunities underway, including I-35, Waterloo Greenway, and Project Connect. Plans for a new Convention Center should leverage P3 opportunities and reflect downtown's goals laid out in the Imagine Austin Plan and Downtown Austin Plan.

**Advance Congress Avenue Design and Street Reconstruction towards visionary outcomes --ASAP**

- We can create language for this after we get through conversations next week. Imagine we'd want to prioritize: We support a reconstruction of Congress Avenue that includes a bold design of the street and bridge to create as much public space as possible, greater pedestrian accessibility and safety, tree canopy enhancements, minimal disruption to businesses during construction, and stretching the existing bond funds to complete as much of the street reconstruction as possible & as soon as possible.

## **Mobility**

### **Adopt the Austin Core Transportation Plan (ACT)**

- The ACT Plan is a foundational mobility study that will prioritize multi-modal transportation options and re-organize how people move into, out of, and through downtown. The ACT Plan must include project phasing and recommendations that respond to and support connectivity to the proposed I-35 reconstruction and Project Connect light rail, provide dedicated transit/micro-mobility lanes, and balance the street right-of-way to enhance the user experience on downtown streets.

### **Obtain a Record of Decision on the I-35 Reconstruction for Modified Alternative 3.**

- The reconstruction of I-35, the first in 50 years, is not only a vital transportation project, but is also the first step in the realization of the City of Austin's Our Future 35 Cap & Stitch Program. The Modified Alternative 3 alternative design provides for capping certain intersections, widening cross streets, and lowering the highway below grade, eliminating the upper decks. It also creates better ingress/egress into downtown and better aligns with the Capital Metro transit network.

### **Adopt Project Connect "Phase 1" Light Rail Alignment.**

- The Phase 1 light rail alignment adopted by the tri-party board (CapMetro, City of Austin, and Austin Transit Partnership) should consider and include feasible recommendations from DAA's Project Connect Working Group, which includes the addition of a station near Wooldridge Square and traffic mitigations at 15th and Cesar Chavez. The working group included transportation experts, property owners, and transit users and considered transportation impacts, present and future development, and connection to key destinations.