

TRANSPORTATION

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183 Toll Project honors east Austin



The 183 Toll Project is an example of a comprehensive effort that not only delivers the infrastructure our region needs to remain connected but honors the historic and cultural roots of the beloved East Austin community.



By Mike Heiligenstein
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Oct 29, 2020

There's no doubt that Austin has changed considerably over the past two decades. No matter what lens you're looking through, our city has undergone significant change as economic development has exploded and our population soared.

Arguably, no area of our capital city has felt this transformation as significantly as East Austin has. And while growth and change are inherent in any city's evolution, the social and cultural fabric of the East Side that we know and love has been significantly altered in recent decades. Many of us have witnessed this change with mixed sentiments. It's important to strike a balance between protecting community culture and preserving the historic framework that makes this city so great, while celebrating and planning for the future.

At the Mobility Authority, we use a holistic approach to transportation planning that both embraces inevitable future growth while mindfully incorporating community involvement from conception of projects through construction and beyond. The 183 Toll Project is an example of a comprehensive effort that not only delivers the infrastructure our region needs to remain connected but honors the historic and cultural roots of the beloved East Austin community.

When we embarked on this project, we made a promise to our community that the project would be developed in a way that respected the cultural and historic values and aesthetic preferences of the people of East Austin. To facilitate and encourage public engagement during the project development process, the agency incorporated a Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) planning approach that gave our

neighbors an opportunity to provide input and influence the project design. Through this process, we distilled the community’s priorities into a set of “design guidelines” detailing how to best approach the aesthetic components of the project and deliver a visually appealing corridor.

From an engineering and design perspective, those elements are visible along the 183 corridor today. If you’ve driven it recently, you’ve noticed the distinctive retaining walls, the unique “delta portal bent” bridges, and the artistic “organ pipe barrier” in the center median, to name a few. We’ll also be adding neighborhood-specific trees and enhanced landscaping throughout, as well as other potential aesthetic improvements. These elements serve their intended infrastructure functions while also highlighting the regional identity of East Austin.

The most visible reflection of that identity will also be present in the extensive network of pedestrian and cyclist amenities that have been incorporated into this project. These include 16 miles of bike lanes, seven miles of sidewalk, and a continuous eight-mile shared use path called the 183 Trail. But it was important to us to take this effort a step further than simply delivering a set of facilities for active transportation users – we are making the 183 Trail into an outdoor space the community can enjoy.

We know that people support what they help create. That’s why we’re continuing to engage the community as we develop a comprehensive set of educational and interpretive signage to be installed along the 183 Trail next year.

Our neighbors have reiterated what we know to be true – many influential people have helped to shape the spirit, culture, and sense of community we see echoed throughout our capital city’s diverse East Side. We want to honor and celebrate what so many leaders worked hard to create, which gave us this foundation upon which to build for the future. With this trail signage, we’ll highlight local people, history, and culture, as well their significance to East Austin and Central Texas.

We know that the 183 Toll Project has already begun spurring additional development across East Austin. It is our hope that the 183 Trail will help play a part in celebrating and preserving the East Austin community and culture we cherish – both today, and into the future.

Learn more at www.mobilityauthority.com.

Mike Heiligenstein has a career in the development of infrastructure in Central Texas and currently leads the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority. Heiligenstein also serves on advisory council of the Texas A&M Transportation Institute and Texas Department of Transportation’s Technical Task Force.

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