Austin Light Rail Phase 1

Final Environmental Impact Statement

Chapter 1: Purpose and Need

Contents

Chapter 1 Purpose and Need 1-1
1.1 Planning Context 1-3
1.2 Purpose and Need Statement 1-6
1.2.1 Increase the Transportation Network Capacity in Response to Existing Travel Demand 1-6
1.2.2 Increase Transportation Choices and Capacity 1-7
1.2.3 Improve Transit Access Between Housing and Jobs 1-8
1.2.4 Support Growth of and Connectivity to Regional Centers 1-8
1.3 Project Goals and Objectives 1-9

Figures

Figure 1-1: Project Location 1-2
Figure 1-2: *Imagine Austin* Activity Centers 1-4

Tables

Table 1-1: Change in Population 1970–2020 1-7
Table 1-2: Project Goals and Objectives 1-9

Chapter 1 Purpose and Need

Effective transportation planning includes developing a clear statement of purpose and need to identify the transportation problems that are to be solved and to frame the scope of a proposed action. The purpose and need establishes why a project is necessary and provides the context for the public and decision-makers to weigh the pros and cons of an investment. Local and regional goals and objectives inform the purpose and need and are used to identify the reasonable range of alternatives that are studied in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Austin Transit Partnership (ATP) proposes to construct the Austin Light Rail Phase 1 Project (the Project), which includes a 9.8-mile light rail transit branched line from points north, south, and east of Downtown Austin, as well as an operations and maintenance facility (OMF), maintenance of way shops, and associated light rail equipment storage functions (see **Figure 1-1**). The proposed Project represents the first phase of the light rail components of Project Connect, which was approved by the Austin City Council in June 2020. In November 2020, voters approved a ballot measure (Proposition A) to increase the City of Austin's (City) property tax rate to provide a dedicated local funding source for the Project Connect System Plan (Project Connect). Project Connect includes a new light rail system and an expanded bus system with more routes (City of Austin 2020). In June 2023, following an extensive community engagement process, the ATP Board of Directors, the Austin City Council, and the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (CapMetro) Board of Directors unanimously approved the *Austin Light Rail Implementation Plan*, which outlines the Project as the initial phase of the light rail system of the Project Connect program (ATP 2023).

In addition to using authorized local funds for development and implementation of the Project, ATP is seeking federal funds from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for the Project and, therefore, must comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act, Section 6(f) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, and other applicable federal environmental requirements. FTA, as the federal lead agency, and ATP, as the local Project sponsor and joint lead agency, have prepared this combined Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)/Record of Decision (ROD) in accordance with NEPA and its implementing regulations. It includes a final evaluation prepared in accordance with Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act and a final evaluation prepared in accordance with Section 6(f) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act.

Figure 1-1: Project Location

This FEIS/ROD has been prepared in accordance with FTA's regulations implementing NEPA, in addition to other federal requirements. The FEIS/ROD follows the January 2025 publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Project. Since the DEIS was published, there have been changes to the federal environmental review process. For example, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) removed its regulations implementing NEPA in response to Executive Order (EO) 14154, *Unleashing American Energy*. As a result, some subject matters and analysis included in the DEIS are no longer required and therefore not included in this FEIS/ROD. Sections where subject matter and analysis have been updated or removed are noted for the reader.

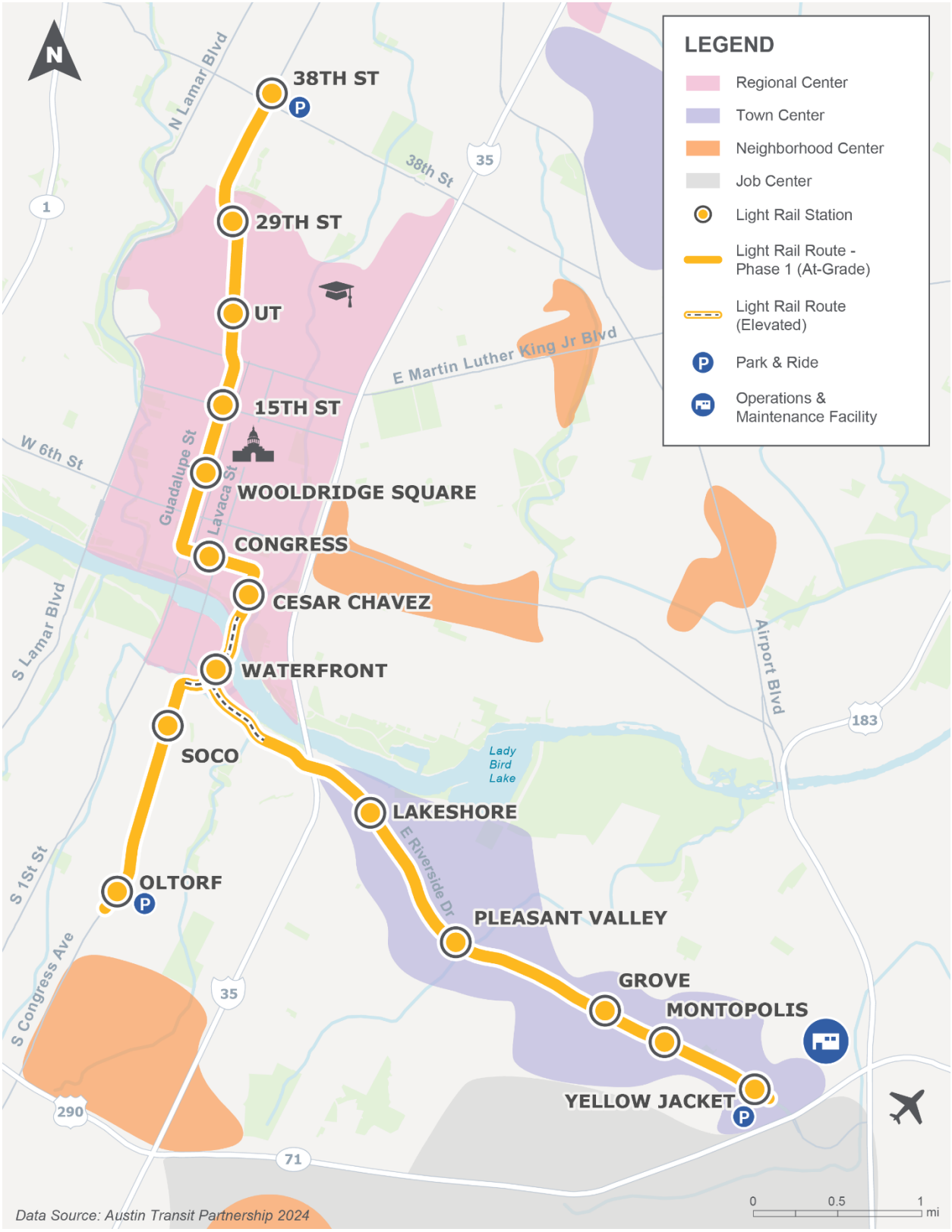
1.1 Planning Context

Planning for high-capacity transit in Central Texas began over two decades ago to address congestion on the capacity-constrained roadway network and accommodate the significant population and employment growth projected for the region. The *Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan* (*Imagine Austin)*, adopted by the City in 2012 and most recently amended in 2024, identifies the need to:

- preserve livability by increasing housing and transportation choices, while keeping Austin healthy, safe, beautiful, and affordable;
- expand transportation choices that encourage Austinites to walk, bike, and take transit;
- address East Austin's general well-being, including the lack of access to healthcare and educational amenities; and
- expand job opportunities and help wage growth catch up to the rising costs of living (City of Austin 2024).

Imagine Austin identifies activity centers that include three subsets: regional centers, town centers, and neighborhood centers. Each is used to define the City's plans to accommodate new residents, jobs, mixed-use areas, open space, and transportation infrastructure over the next 30 years. The activity centers are focused around planned high-capacity transit routes, which include CapMetro bus stops, and proposed Project light rail stations. For example, Downtown, West Campus, and South Central Waterfront are identified as regional centers serving retail, cultural, recreational, and entertainment destinations for Central Texas with mixed-use development, regional-scale commercial areas, and a mix of housing types from low- to high-rise multifamily, rowhouses, and townhouses. A town center is planned for East Austin along East Riverside Drive to transform an underdeveloped commercial strip into an important hub where people will live and work (see **Figure 1-2**).

Figure 1-2: *Imagine Austin* Activity Centers



In April 2019, the Austin City Council approved the *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan*, a comprehensive multimodal transportation plan for the future of the City's transportation network. Then, in June 2020, the Austin City Council and the CapMetro Board approved and adopted a conceptual plan for Project Connect, an integral part of the *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan*. Fulfilling a key action of *Imagine Austin*, the *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan* provides a comprehensive multimodal transportation plan to improve and sustain the quality of life for all Austinites. *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan* action items include partnering with CapMetro to implement the Project Connect program and to "conduct corridor-based land use planning in parallel with corridor mobility planning…to calibrate zoning and land development code requirements with needs, constraints, and opportunities to create cohesive multimodal corridors, quality built environment, and context-sensitive development that aligns with [FTA] transit supportive density ratings" (City of Austin 2023a).

In October 2020, FTA and CapMetro completed Planning and Environmental Linkages studies for two high-capacity transit projects that were components of the Project Connect program (referred to herein as the 2020 Proposed Projects). Evaluating mode and corridor alternatives, these studies documented the purpose and needs, alternatives analysis, and public outreach (CapMetro 2020a, 2020b). As proposed, the 2020 Proposed Projects planned for two light rail lines in Austin—one line running through downtown extending to the north and south, and another running downtown extending east to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. For additional information, the planning documents prepared for the 2020 Proposed Projects are available at:

- https://www.atptx.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Orange_Line_Planning__Environmental_Linkages_Study_Final.pdf; and
- https://www.atptx.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Blue-Line_Gold-Line-PEL_Final-compressed.pdf.

The Planning and Environmental Linkages process resulted in broad public support for the purpose and need, and the alternatives analysis for the 2020 Proposed Projects. As the environmental review process for the 2020 Proposed Projects proceeded and design work advanced, ATP determined that the original scope and sequencing for the 2020 Proposed Projects would need to be updated to address increased costs caused by rising real estate costs, inflation, construction cost escalation, and scope refinement. ATP led a community-based planning process to define an economically feasible and expandable light rail alignment that would meet existing transportation goals and objectives. Following a robust community engagement process, ATP, the City, and CapMetro adopted the Austin Light Rail Implementation Plan on June 1, 2023.

On June 6, 2023, the ATP Board of Directors, Austin City Council, and CapMetro Board of Directors unanimously approved the *Austin Light Rail Implementation Plan* (ATP 2023). This plan identifies the first phase of light rail, which is the Project described in this FEIS/ROD. The alternatives analysis process undertaken for the Project is summarized in Chapter 2, with supporting information on the Project planning history provided in **Appendix A**.

1.2 Purpose and Need Statement

The Purpose and Need Statement has been refined for clarity and to reflect changes in federal policy and guidance that occurred after publication of the DEIS and in response to public and agency feedback. These refinements are explanatory in nature and do not materially change the goals and objectives established for the Project or the evaluation of alternatives (see Section 1.3 below). The Project's purpose remains to address growing corridor travel demand with a reliable, safe, affordable, and time-competitive light rail system that operates in a dedicated guideway.

The Project is needed to:

- increase the transportation network capacity in response to existing travel demand;
- increase transportation choices and capacity to support Austin's population and employment growth;
- improve transit access between housing and jobs; and
- support growth of, and connectivity to, the regional activity centers.

Transportation problems in the Austin Metro Area, a six-county regional planning area, are well documented in the adopted *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan* and the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) *2045 Regional Transportation Plan* and are summarized below (City of Austin 2023a; CAMPO 2024a).

1.2.1 Increase the Transportation Network Capacity in Response to Existing Travel Demand

The Austin Metro Area is the fastest growing region in the country, with a population of more than 975,000, as recorded by the American Community Survey 2022 1-Year Estimates, and Austin is a major driver of that growth (City of Austin 2023b). Austin's developed land area expanded from 53 square miles in 1970 to more than 372 square miles in 2019 (City of Austin 2023a) as the population nearly quadrupled (with greater growth within the Austin Metro Area; see **Table 1-1**).

Table 1-1: Change in Population 1970–2020

Year	City of Austin		Austin Metro Area	
	Population	Percent Change from Prior Decade	Population	Percent Change from Prior Decade
1970	251,808	35	398,938	32
1980	345,890	37	585,051	47
1990	465,622	35	846,227	45
2000	656,562	41	1,249,763	48
2010	790,390	20	1,716,289	37
2020	961,855	22	2,283,371	33

Source: City of Austin 2023c.

Austin's roadway system has not kept up with the amount of growth in the region or the changing land use patterns. While Austin's historic downtown was built as a compact grid system, north-south highways built in the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., Interstate 35 [I-35] and MoPac Expressway) contributed to more widespread development patterns that have resulted in increased congestion; hazardous conditions for bicycling and walking; and challenges to public transportation's speed and reliability (City of Austin 2024). A key challenge for the future, as identified in *Imagine Austin*, is counteracting the prevailing trend of outward development that consumes vacant land and natural resources, reduces air and water quality, and diminishes the natural environment. The City's vision includes interconnected development patterns that support public transit and a variety of transportation choices, while reducing sprawl, congestion, travel times, and negative effects on existing neighborhoods (City of Austin 2024).

The *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan* notes that barriers in mobility connectivity have created hurdles for individuals without access to vehicles and those who frequently rely on transit services to reach higher wage jobs in various parts of Austin. Approximately 74 percent of Austinites drive to work or school alone and only 4 percent use transit largely because it does not provide an option that is as time competitive as a private vehicle (City of Austin 2023a).

1.2.2 Increase Transportation Choices and Capacity

CAMPO estimates that both population and employment in the Austin Metro Area will more than double to nearly 4.7 million residents and 2.4 million jobs by 2045, yet new roadway capacity can grow by only 15 percent without substantial property acquisition (CAMPO 2024a). As population and employment have grown in central Texas, the traditional approach to providing transportation capacity by expanding roadways is increasingly complex and unsustainable. To provide mobility and accessibility for current and future residents, the region will need to make better use of existing transportation right-of-way (ROW) and find ways to move more people in a limited amount of space.

A key goal of the *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan* is to achieve a 50/50 mode share for commuting to manage congestion in Austin as the region continues to grow. A 50/50 mode share would mean that 50 percent of Austinites would drive alone to work, while 50 percent would use other modes of transportation (e.g., transit, carpool, walk, micro-mobility options) or work from home. Among the range of solutions to achieve this goal is to increase the percentage of people who take transit from 4 to 16 percent. City officials estimate that a 16 percent transit mode share, along with increases in other modes, would result in the same number of cars on the road today while accommodating a doubling of the population (City of Austin 2023a).

1.2.3 Improve Transit Access Between Housing and Jobs

Home prices, rents, and property taxes in the City of Austin have quickly become less affordable. The median home price in Austin in July 2024 was $585,000 (Austin Board of Realtors 2024), approximately 62.5 percent higher compared to the median home price of $360,000 in October 2017 (Austin Board of Realtors 2017). For renters, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents, rising housing costs pose particular challenges. Employees are forced to live farther from their jobs, which results in the need for affordable and reliable transportation.

Over the last 10 years, jobs in high-tech industries rose nearly 62 percent in the Austin Metro Area and account for 17 percent of all jobs according to the Austin Chamber of Commerce (2021). While these high-paying jobs have accelerated the area's economy, more than one-third of local households in the City of Austin remain cost-burdened.

The Project is consistent with local initiatives for housing. In 2023, the City and CapMetro approved a plan for transit-oriented development (TOD) (City of Austin 2023d). The goals of the TOD plan are to increase mixed-use development and housing for individuals below a specific income threshold in the Project's station areas (City of Austin 2023d) and to create more vibrant and livable communities centered around the new transit system. In 2023, the City eliminated parking minimums (a mandated pre-determined number of parking spaces for all new development citywide to free up space for housing, promote housing, increase use of public transportation, and increase density along transit hubs). Additionally, in 2023 and 2024, the City approved multiple code amendments that increase housing capacity by relaxing height restrictions for development near single-family homes and creating a new density bonus program. The Project supports the City's parking policy by providing a viable alternative to private vehicle use and is expected to catalyze private investment in housing development in station areas through affordable and efficient access to Austin's jobs, healthcare, and cultural resources. In turn, the City's policies are expected to result in increased ridership on the light rail system.

1.2.4 Support Growth of and Connectivity to Regional Centers

Connecting regional centers (one of three types of activity centers defined in *Imagine Austin*) and activity corridors by transit would encourage transit-supportive land use patterns. The *Imagine Austin* activity centers that attract people to shop, work, and

socialize, like Downtown Austin and the University of Texas at Austin (UT), generate high demand for transportation services today. Efficient transit connections would channel growth into the strategic regional, town, and neighborhood centers identified in *Imagine Austin* and would provide the quality-of-life benefits that result from transit-supportive land use. The Project is a key component in the local land use plans that seek to direct future growth into the regional centers of Downtown Austin, West Campus, and South Central Waterfront, and the planned town center along East Riverside Drive.

1.3 Project Goals and Objectives

ATP defined goals and objectives for the Project, based on the purpose and need for the Project and in coordination with the City and CapMetro, to guide the development and evaluation of alternatives to carry into the DEIS for detailed analysis and public comment (see **Table 1-2**). The goals and objectives have been refined to reflect the community values expressed during focus group sessions and a subsequent 6-week intensive community engagement period held by ATP in spring 2023. The goals and objectives have also been refined to reflect current federal policy. The refined goals and objectives broaden the focus from specific demographic groups to transit-dependent populations generally and emphasize the City's mobility and land use goals. These refinements maintain consistency with the Project's core transportation mission and purpose and need. The alternatives analysis process and community feedback are summarized in **Appendix A**, and the community engagement process is discussed in **Appendix B**.

Table 1-2: Project Goals and Objectives

Goals	Objectives
Mobility and Accessibility: Increase efficiency, attractiveness, and utilization of public transportation within the region.	• Provide frequent, fast, reliable, and safe transit service that is competitive with the automobile. • Maximize the number of jobs and key destinations in the light rail service area. • Move as many people as possible via a reliable and efficient system that minimizes disruptions to vehicular traffic. • Link housing and employment centers. • Enable expandability to future priority extensions.

Goals	Objectives
Land Use Plans and Policy: Serve as a catalyst for TOD and economic development.	• Support *Imagine Austin's* "compact and connected" land use goals by serving designated activity centers and activity corridors. • Use transportation investment to support TOD and serve existing and future housing for individuals below a specific income threshold. • Support connectivity of activity centers through attention to safety, comfort, and aesthetics in Project design. • Develop station area plans that reflect community priorities.
Regional Connectivity: Expand the reach of the light rail investment considering existing and proposed transit services.	• Maximize connections to existing and proposed public transportation. • Seamlessly integrate the light rail system with CapMetro public transportation services and City active transportation networks. • Support the *Austin Strategic Mobility Plan* 50/50 mode share goal by increasing ridership on public transportation. • Facilitate future connection to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. • Develop a light rail system that facilitates expandability.
Access to Opportunities: Invest in mobility solutions that connect communities to housing, jobs, education, and healthcare.	• Add light rail in areas with high vehicle crash rates as a strategy for addressing safety concerns in communities disproportionately affected by traffic crashes. • Design community engagement to maximize participation of existing transit users in the design process. • Support strategies that promote TOD housing for individuals below a specific income threshold development, retention along light rail, and connection to jobs and healthcare.
High Performance Infrastructure: Preserve and make efficient use of local resources.	• Maximize capacity of the existing transportation network to accommodate projected growth and make efficient use of the transportation right-of-way. • Avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse effects on air, land, water, parkland, heritage trees, and historic squares, as appropriate, to preserve local resources. • Use best practices in Project design and construction to incorporate materials for life-cycle durability.
Customer Experience: Provide a travel experience that is competitive with the automobile.	• Provide safe and comfortable transit service, amenities, and facilities. • Coordinate with existing and planned transit services. • Enhance modal choices to encourage walking and bicycling to transit stations.