

AUSTIN TRANSIT PARTNERSHIP

COMING TO A NEIGHBORHOOD NEAR YOU: PROJECT CONNECT'S COMMUNITY DESIGN WORKSHOPS

Project of the Year Award

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**AUSTIN-AMERICAN STATESMAN
COMMUNITY IMPACT NEWSPAPER**



PROJECT BRIEF

Organizing Group

Austin Transit Partnership

Location

Austin, TX

Key Question / Problem

The City of Austin's transit system is changing with the implementation of a voter-approved program called Project Connect. The plan includes building two new light rail lines, which will impact dozens of neighborhoods. How can we effectively engage these communities who have the most at-stake to inform them of design plans and get their input during a pandemic, precluding in-person engagement activities?

Sample Methods

The team uses several techniques to safely connect with the public. Some of those tools include neighborhood-level working groups, targeted Community Design Workshops with virtual breakout discussions, real-time surveys during meetings, at-stop outreach and flyer distribution, an Online Engagement Library and interactive conversations to demonstrate how the community's feedback informed design solutions.

Results

The feedback from stakeholders was used to inform 30% design milestone. Their input advised decisions on access and accessibility, safety, placemaking opportunities, potential business and property impacts, east-west connectivity, tunnel options, amenities, vehicles, light rail incorporation into the larger transportation network, and bicycle and pedestrian connectivity.

Impact Level

CRITICAL: These targeted engagement tactics established trust with residents along both light rail corridors, provided an opportunity for community collaboration on decisions leading to the 30% design milestone, and informed a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) reflective of community needs and concerns.

Timeframe

September 2021 – Present

People Engaged

The team engaged over 1,947 total attendees from more than 190 unique zip codes.

Weblink

projectconnect.com/get-involved

THE PROBLEM & CHALLENGE

In November 2020, Austin voters overwhelmingly approved a multibillion-dollar transit expansion plan called Project Connect. The city's current transit plan includes a bus system and one commuter rail line. With the passage of Project Connect, the transit system will add two light rail lines covering more than 29 miles, another commuter rail line and add new rapid bus routes. As with any infrastructure project that must be retrofitted into a built environment, each light rail corridor contains many complex design challenges, and those solutions always come with tradeoffs.

Knowing the light rail corridors will impact dozens of neighborhoods, the challenge was engaging the communities who will be affected to present options for design and use community feedback to narrow down or inform new design options. The typical tool for this kind of engagement is the design charette—a technique that involves in-person small group conversations in which design options are examined, tradeoffs are discussed, and community concerns and opportunities are folded into the process. But for more than two years, the ongoing pandemic has made it difficult and unsafe to host in-person engagement activities.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

When Project Connect passed in 2020, the design was in its preliminary stage. As the program entered a new phase post-election, staff needed public input to help garner feedback for each

light rail project to move the design forward. With the community's help, our design teams were able to make decisions on station layouts, tunnel and bridge options, and aesthetics.

SAMPLE METHODS

- **Neighborhood-level Working Groups.** To better understand the concerns of each neighborhood along the light rail corridors, the team invited all stakeholders to join virtual meetings to provide honest feedback about potential design options. These meetings were broken down by neighborhoods to focus on how the light rail line will interact in their areas. Participants had a chance to weigh in on design options and concerns about the light rail being built in their backyard. The input from these smaller groups would be used by the design teams to further develop options for each light rail.
- **Community Design Workshops.** The team hosted several virtual Community Design Workshops to review design options in different neighborhoods. This was another opportunity for stakeholders to weigh in on access to light rail stations and preferred amenities,

such as bike and pedestrian pathways. This feedback helped inform solutions that will be reflected in the 30% design milestone.

- **Real-Time Mentimeter Surveys.** The program is affecting the entire city of Austin, but it's hard to know how every individual is affected. Within these virtual meetings, real-time surveys were administered on screen using Mentimeter, a popular polling app to get insight into neighborhood priorities and concerns. All participants were able to see their feedback in real-time. The benefits of this kind of surveying include transparency and exposure to the diverse perspectives of others in their neighborhood. The information gathered from these surveys provided critical guidance to the design team. For example, in one Community Design Workshop, several participants with disabilities expressed their

concerns about depressing the future light rail station because it would require them to use elevators to access it. If an elevator were to break down, they feared being stuck--a situation they had encountered in other cities.

- **At-stop outreach and flyer distribution.** To make sure every meeting reached its maximum effectiveness and accurately represented the community, our team conducted extensive outreach to make sure people were well-informed about their opportunities to give input. Our team would go out to current transit stops, as well as businesses and homes in the area to hand out flyers about the meetings, and other outlets in which they could give feedback. It was a successful method to make sure we heard the voices of those who

will be most affected by Project Connect.

- **Online Engagement Library.** While the team tried to find the most optimal times for these virtual meetings, not everyone was able to attend and that's why we created our Online Engagement Library. Community members can visit the library to view our past meetings and presentations, and then provide their comments and feedback via email.
- **Post-design decision meetings.** It's important for the community to know that their feedback matters. To demonstrate how community feedback was incorporated, the engagement team provided a summary of previous feedback themes and how they were incorporated at all subsequent working group meetings.

ALIGNMENT WITH IAP2 CORE VALUES

Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.

Project Connect's light rail lines will impact dozens of neighborhoods, and the potential designs will pose challenges along the corridors that require tradeoffs. The agency understands that neighborhood-level input will lead to designs that truly reflect the neighborhoods and people that will be affected most by them. To that end, Project Connect established 10 geographically specific working groups comprised of community members who live, work, and/or are regularly in the area. Participants gave staff critical input about their general concerns, as well as aspirations regarding the new light rail lines. The engagement team also developed a series of virtual Community Design Workshops to highlight design challenges, present possible solutions to those challenges, and to daylight the tradeoffs associated with each solution.

Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

The input given in every virtual community meeting gave the Project Connect team the direction needed to make recommendations on design solutions. For example, during one working group meeting for a particularly complex intersection in a highly populated, lower income, BIPOC neighborhood, the community made it clear that they prioritized safe crossings and minimal distance between bus service and rail service. This feedback motivated the team to look beyond the current options on the table, acknowledging that the current options didn't meet those needs. Now, the team is working with the City of Austin to find a more creative solutions that meets both the program's goal and the community's needs. This is just one of several instances where the feedback showed different priorities at a community-level that the design team could incorporate into their design plans.

Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.

Each virtual meeting had a designated section to explore the environmental impacts and benefits of each design option. Those impacts included everything from trees and air quality to water management. The community engagement team took time in these meetings to inform the community about these impacts, so they could provide more informed input on design options. That feedback was balanced with how people preferred to move and interact with their neighborhood, to create the most optimal design for our 30% milestone. Beyond just the environmental impact, social justice and interest groups were invited to participate in every Community Design Workshop to represent the special needs of diverse populations. For example, representatives from the disability rights group, ADAPT, provided invaluable input on accessibility of all design options. Their feedback provided a much-needed additional perspective to the conversations that we wouldn't have had otherwise. In addition, each virtual workshop offered live translation services in Spanish, the dominant second language in Austin, as well as American Sign Language. Our promotional materials were also produced in both English and Spanish.

Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.

During an ongoing pandemic, options for the team to conduct in-person outreach were extremely limited, so the targeted virtual Community Design Workshops were the best alternative. To ensure that those most affected were part of those conversations, the engagement team conducted socially distanced outreach at bus stops and transit centers in these areas to promote upcoming meetings, other ways to get involved and to get their input on these design

challenges. In one case, feedback received at an already-existing transit center helped shine the light on the benefits of one design solution over the other for the proposed light rail.

Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.

Community engagement at Project Connect goes beyond just virtual community meetings. Our team recognizes that not everyone feels comfortable engaging in real time and that some are not comfortable and familiar with virtual platforms. To account for these groups, our team conducted at-stop engagement, provided self-paced online opportunities such as virtual open houses, provided opportunities for feedback at neighborhood association meetings, and created a dedicated email address and phone numbers for each light rail line to make it as easy as possible to provide feedback.

Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.

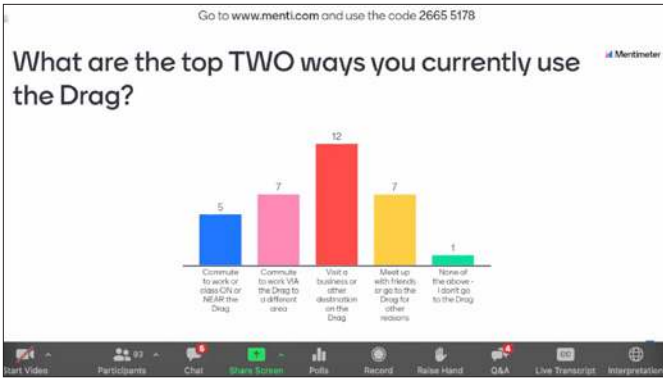
To make sure our community had the most accurate and understandable information possible, the virtual meetings utilized a talk show format. As members of the design team presented drawings and schematics of design options, a member of the engagement team would jump in to ask clarifying questions to make sure participants understood what they were looking at, pointing out familiar landmarks and making sure that associated tradeoffs were clear to the audience. This enabled participants to give more meaningful feedback. Through the Mentimeter surveys and live Q&A, these workshops also gave community members an opportunity to hear a variety of opinions and comments from other participants, which broadened their perspective and gave them a better understanding of their community. To ensure transparency, summary reports of feedback collected at each community meeting were posted online, along with a video recording of the meeting.

Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

Reporting on how the community's input informed the design of the program was critical to building community trust. The workshops and working group meetings were iterative, providing an opportunity to report on how the previous meeting's feedback was factored into the latest design option. For

example, community feedback at a Downtown Working Group meeting revealed a strong desire for improved bike and pedestrian connectivity surrounding station areas. One design option for a downtown tunnel portal would have disrupted the flow of bike and pedestrian traffic on a popular downtown hike-and-bike trail. In response to the community's feedback, the design team was able to shift the proposed portal to avoid the disruption.





THANK YOU FOR YOUR
CONSIDERATION!

