

September 5th, 2023

Re: [East 5th Street Rail and Trail Improvements–Navasota Street to East Seventh Street](#)

To Capital Metro and City of Austin staff,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the 30% design and first public input opportunity for the East 5th Street Rail and Trail Improvements–Navasota Street to East Seventh Street project.

East 5th Street Project in Context of Overall Red Line Trail and Rail

The concept and proposal to include a walking and bicycling trail (Red Line Trail) along the Capital Metro Rail Red Line goes back decades, and is a component of a dozen neighborhood plans, the City of Austin Strategic Mobility Plan, and the 2004 Capital Metro election to approve the Capital Metro Rail Red Line under state law. Since 2004, the Capital Metro board has periodically directed staff to pursue opportunities to fill gaps in the walking and bicycling trail, including in this area. This East 5th Street project represents a once-in-generation—perhaps the last opportunity this century—to fill the trail gaps in the Plaza Saltillo area. The greater public, as represented by the Capital Metro board, neighborhood associations, and the Red Line Parkway Initiative, are depending on staff at Capital Metro and City of Austin to use this opportunity to work toward filling those gaps.

Red Line Parkway Plan

Red Line Parkway Initiative approached Capital Metro and the City of Austin in 2017 to proactively co-create these projects with the public. In 2019, the Capital Metro Board and Austin City Council supported this effort by directing their respective staffs to partner with RLPI to create the Red Line Parkway Plan, and to provide a timeline within six months to develop that plan. In lieu of that plan, Capital Metro and the City of Austin are generally offering RLPI and the general public to weigh in on individual rail and trail projects only after those projects are well developed by staff at one of both of these agencies, and in some cases, the public is not provided any opportunity to weigh in. RLPI has asked for public engagement at initial stages on these projects, but neither agency offers this. This is also the case for the East 5th Street project, which is already well developed and is just now being shared with the public.

Capital Metro staff began a “Red Line Trail Study” earlier this year, which is anticipated to determine an end-to-end alignment for the Red Line Trail, including in this area. The East 5th Street Project will fulfill some key parts of the 2019 board directive for the Red Line Parkway Plan. The Red Line Trail Study process will engage the public proactively so that future rail and trail projects have this public-informed context ahead of detailed project design.

General Support for Proposed East 5th Street Improvements

The project proposal includes welcomed improvements to the Capital Metro Rail Red Line and future Green Line, and to the walking and bicycling accommodations in the area. The partnership between Capital Metro and the City of Austin that coordinates the delivery of both rail and walk & bike improvements (which is also rail access) is a welcome development, and reflects the original intent, messaging, and ballot language when the Red Line proposal was presented alongside the Red Line Trail proposal to voters and the general public in 2003 to 2004.

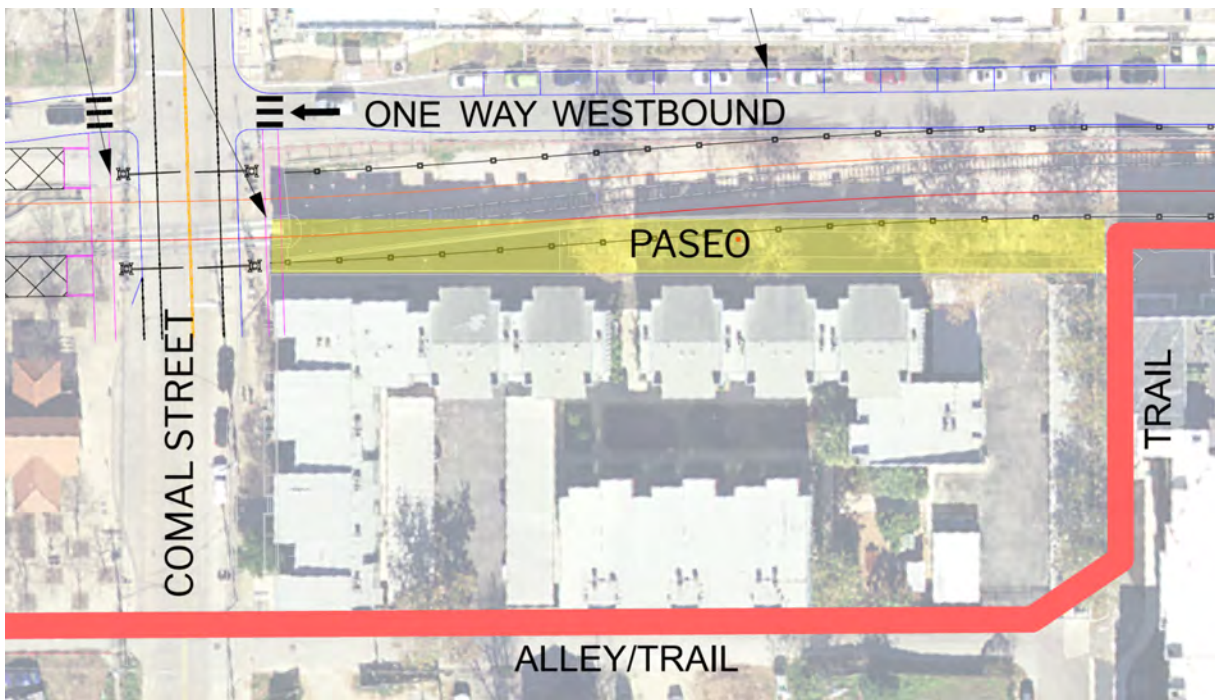
We generally welcome the proposed improvements to the walk & bike accommodations, given the constraints to continue to provide basic motor vehicle access along 5th Street. Specifically, we support the proposal to make East 5th Street a one-way street through the project area, and to include a traffic diverter at Matamoros Street.

Requested Changes to Proposed East 5th Street Improvements

The Red Line Parkway Initiative has several requested changes to the proposed East 5th Street Improvements.

Widen the paseo

Our primary request is to widen [the paseo](#) that is immediately south of the railroad, heading east from Comal Street, and adjacent to Saltillo Lofts. See “paseo” in the schematic image below for more context. We ask that the west end of the paseo be widened to match the width at its midpoint between Comal and Concho Sts. The staff proposal not only doesn’t widen the paseo, but actually narrows the paseo.



Widening the paseo would provide a viable continuous trail route through the area, which does not currently exist for the Red Line Trail / Parkway. The alleyway from Concho St. to Comal St. will continue to provide access to a couple dozen residential parking spaces and a new loading dock, likely for several decades. The paseo would provide a direct connection to Comal St., which could accommodate a good walk & bike trail across and along the street (Comal St.). This could either connect into the existing alleyway west of Comal St., which is viable for removal of motor vehicle access, or connect into a slightly modified Plaza Saltillo, which could possibly accommodate through walk & bike access. (There are several route options to connect from the paseo to west of Plaza Saltillo, which can be discussed in detail separately.)

Based on what is shown in the provided schematics and the various constraints described by project staff at both agencies, there are a few other viable adjustments that would need to be made in order to accomplish this (widening the paseo). Some of these adjustments may be more preferable than others, and the requested paseo width can be accomplished by making just some of these adjustments, and not necessarily all of them.

The essential adjustment is to move the railroad and Plaza Saltillo Station platforms to the north by roughly 15' so that the rail tracks can continue east across Comal St. further north, providing more space for the paseo. This can be accomplished through one or more of the following:

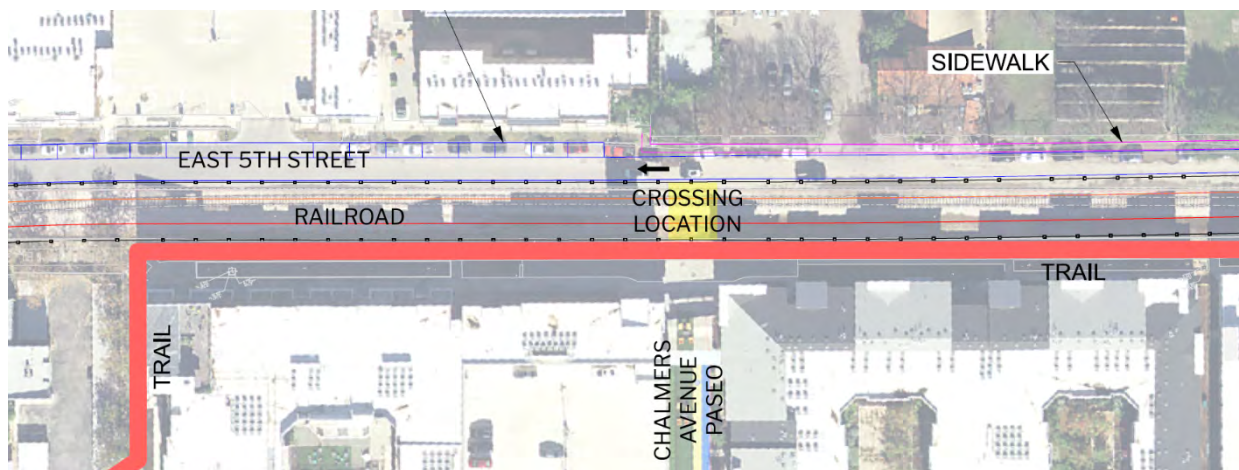
- Narrow the East 5th Street right-of-way between Comal St. and Onion St., i.e. the travelway just north of the new Plaza Saltillo Station northern platform. This can provide the minimal

width needed for fire access, and be outfitted as a shared street for the time being. As the properties to its north redevelop, the right-of-way can be reconsidered, and new space will likely be available to provide a sidewalk. This may also require some other minor adjustments at Comal St., e.g. providing a raised crosswalk across 5th St.

- Alternatively, this block of 5th St. could be closed to the public, and a cul-de-sac turnaround created at Onion St. in order to provide access to 5th St. from Navasota St.
- Additional alternatives to reduce the need for width on this section of 5th St. are possible.
- Minor adjustments can be made to rail and other transportation parameters in order to provide small portions of space that collectively provide enough additional space for the paseo. This initial project proposal likely includes many ideal or preferred widths/lengths for the rail and roadway accommodations, but many of these can be reduced to minimum or acceptable dimensions in order to provide adequate paseo width for the Red Line Trail / Parkway.
- Moving [the retaining wall](#) along the north edge of East 5th Street would provide additional right-of-way for East 5th Street.

Add an at-grade ped/bike crossing aligned with the Chalmers Avenue paseo

We ask that the project include an at-grade ped/bike crossing of the railroad [at or near the Chalmers Avenue paseo](#). This would provide a sanctioned crossing where many Austinites and CapMetro transit users have created unsanctioned desired paths through or over the existing fence. See “crossing location” in the schematics image below for more context.



We understand the motivation to minimize or reduce the number of sanctioned railroad crossings, but there are several reasons to favor adding this one.

- This would fill the only gap in what is otherwise an uninterrupted 1.5-mile safe and quiet street connection for walking between Lady Bird Lake and East 11th St. If CapMetro and the City of Austin close this gap, Red Line Parkway Initiative will also work to ensure that this becomes a viable safe and quiet bicycling route for this length as well.
- This portion of the railroad is not on the primary freight line, and serves only as a MetroRail passenger rail spur to Downtown Austin.
- The railroad speeds in this location are low and will remain low.
- As mentioned above, there are existing unsanctioned crossings here. Numerous rail safety studies have shown that providing a sanctioned crossing where an unsanctioned crossing exists, can improve safety. Of note, the 2018 MetroRail fatal collision with a pedestrian walking along the tracks on this block was in large part due to a lack of provision for safe, clear, and convenient walking accommodations.

Additional requests, from west to east

Navasota Street crossing: Add traffic calming for Navasota Street, including a raised crosswalk for the trail.

Alley parking at Plaza Saltillo: Transition the alley parking at Plaza Saltillo to only serve as temporary loading and unloading, rather than more general use parking.

Comal Street bike lanes: Upgrade these to offer physical protection and delineation, to help prevent people from parking or stopping motor vehicles in the bike lanes.

Concho Street trail entrance: Revisit the design of [the transition from the Concho Street alley to the trail](#) to make this transition less challenging for users. Some possibilities include adding a splitter island (to divide ingress/egress traffic) or reducing sightline obstacles.

Traffic calming along 5th Street: Add additional traffic calming measures on the 5th Street shared street portion from Robert T. Martinez Street to Pedernales Street.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback and for reviewing this. We look forward to meeting to discuss this. Please feel free to reach out with questions or feedback in the meantime.

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