

Reasons for Voting No – in More Detail

1. The full cost is \$1.799 billion, not just \$720 million, and only 1/18th goes to traffic relief

The \$720 million is actually the first installment (Phase 1) of the total \$1.799 billion package. The corridor beautification portion per the Statesman lead article on September 25, 2016 will cost \$1.561 billion. Adding the \$101 million for congestion relief and \$137 million for sidewalks, bike lanes and more (which are already contained in the \$720 million proposition) brings the total to \$1.799 billion.

Till Ben Wear's article in the Statesman, the full cost had not been adequately publicized. It took some ferreting to find the Memorandum from the City Manager, Marc Ott, to the Mayor and Council members on June 16, 2016. Question 7 in the Memo reads, "What is the total cost of implementing the corridor plans, excluding elements of MLK/FM 969 in the County?" Answer: "Staff estimates the cost to implement the full improvements within City limits to be approximately \$1.5 billion."

I suspect that our City officials knew there was no way we Austinites would approve a \$1.8 billion bond issue of which less than 1/18th goes to traffic congestion relief, so they have proposed a foot-in-the-door \$720 million bond proposal as Phase 1 without publicizing Phase 2. This is an example of the lack of transparency at City Hall that needs to change. I am grateful to Statesman columnist Ben Wear for bringing the total cost of the package into focus with his September 25 article.

The amount going to traffic congestion relief is so small (\$101 million – only a little over 5% of the total) that the manager at TxDOT with whom I had breakfast the week of September 12 said with some frustration, "The bond issue is not a rational response to our needs."

The \$1.8 billion bond package will eventually cost the average Austin homeowner \$1,200 over a 5-year period (about \$4 per \$1,000 of home valuation) assuming Prop 1 passes and the Council then asks us voters to approve a \$1.079 billion Phase 2 proposal. West Austin homeowners can expect at least \$2,000 of added property tax cost over a 5-year period on average.

2. There is a much better traffic relief alternative that can be approved within a year, will not raise our taxes, and is less than 1/3 as expensive as the combine \$1.7 billion package.

A much better alternative is a \$500 million Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal to relieve congestion across the City and to provide needed drainage and sidewalk work in districts that will not share equally in the traffic relief funds. If elected, I will work diligently to get this new and much better Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal on the ballot within a year.

The Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal could include the following:

a. \$150 million to upgrade 360 to a limited access highway for its entire length. The entire cost to upgrade 360 will be around \$300 million, and TxDOT normally matches funds with municipalities. Some may argue that 360 is for District 10 only and that the other City Council members won't go along, but the 360 upgrade will benefit Districts 6, 7 and 8 as well.

b. \$30 million of traffic congestion relief by making improvements to Anderson Mill Rd, to the intersection of RM 620 and RW 2222 (4 Points), and to Parmer Lane between SH45 and Brushy Creek. (This is in the current bond proposition.)

c. \$8 million for improvements to the Old Bee Caves Road Bridge. (This is in the current bond proposition.)

d. \$12 million for improvements to Spicewood Springs Rd east of 360. The cost as allocated in the current bond proposition is \$17 million. Because the property owners along the proposed improvements will benefit significantly, they will be asked to contribute \$5 million of the cost bringing the total to \$17 million.

e. \$150 million for a number of traffic congestion relief projects throughout Austin such as a right turn lane onto 2222 for City Park Rd and a traffic light at Mt. Bonnell Rd and 2222.

f. \$15 million for safer intersections, referred to as “implementation of fatality reduction strategies including projects on the Top Crash Location Intersection Priorities Improvements List”. (This is in the current bond proposition.)

g. \$35 million for sidewalks and implementation of Safe Routes to Schools, Public and Private. (This is similar to what is in the current bond proposition.)

h. \$100 million for drainage work needed in 5+ districts due to real estate developments over the years at the head of watersheds and along them.

The Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal will not raise our property taxes, whereas the Mobility Bond proposition will raise them \$73/year per home of average value. The reason for the dramatic difference is as follows. The \$720 Mobility Bond is funded using \$250 million of our City’s current \$500 million of bond capacity which has no incremental effect on our property taxes. The remaining \$470 million of funding raises our property taxes \$73/year per average home. In contrast, the \$500 million Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal will use all \$500 million of Austin’s bond capacity at no incremental cost to us taxpayers. The additional use of Austin’s bond capacity has already been anticipated by the need for drainage projects in a future bond referendum in 2017 or 2018. These are now included in this Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal.

Other projects such as corridor beautification, bike trails, and sidewalks would be part of a separate proposition.

Some of us voters may be thinking that the Mobility Bond is better than nothing, but if the Mayor and Council’s Im-mobility Bond passes this November, we could be delayed years in getting a viable traffic relief bond proposition on the ballot.

3. Traffic relief funding (\$101 million) in Prop 1 is insufficient to fund the work that is promised

Of the \$101 million for traffic relief, \$63 million is allocated for District 10 projects – \$46 million for 360 and \$17 million for Spicewood Springs Rd east of 360. The remaining \$38 million is allocated as follows: \$30 million of traffic congestion relief by making improvements to Anderson Mill Rd, to the intersection of RM 620 and RW 2222 (4 Points), and to Parmer Lane between SH45 and Brushy Creek, and \$8 million for improvements to the Old Bee Caves Road Bridge.

The \$46 million is insufficient to fund the promised overpasses on 360. Three overpasses are listed – at Spicewood Springs Rd/Bluffstone Dr and at Westlake Dr, and a bridge for Courtyard Dr that would pass over 360. According to the TxDOT manager with whom I had breakfast the week of September 12, the total cost of those overpasses is \$110 million. The Mobility Bond proponents assume that TxDOT will match the funds. This is likely, but TxDOT has not formally committed to do so. The trouble is that with the matching funds, it only adds up to \$92 million – \$18 million shy of the \$110 million cost. I asked him how the \$18 million shortfall would be bridged, and he said, “We would likely only build the overpasses at Westlake and Spicewood Springs. Those two are the more expensive of the 3.”

The 360 overpasses are not a viable long-term solution to traffic congestion on 360. Building 3 overpasses on 360 will merely move the bottlenecks to Great Hills Trail, Lakewood Dr, Pascal Lane, Westbank Dr, Lost Creek Blvd, and Walsh Tarleton Ln among others. The Mobility Bond proposition should have earmarked \$150 million to upgrade 360 to a limited access highway for its entire length, with matching funds from TxDOT.

The \$17 million is to upgrade Spicewood Springs Rd east of 360 to 4 lanes for its entire length. This needs to be done, but there are other areas and intersections that are more congested with longer backups. We drive Spicewood Springs Rd east of 360 regularly, and have found that the traffic flows quite well even at rush hour. Yes, it is difficult to make left turns or pull out into traffic during the rush hours, but the wait isn't more than that of a traffic light change. It's interesting to note that this improvement is directly in front of the Austin Board of Realtors' new headquarters and that my opponent is a realtor of long standing who is actively supported by the Austin Board of Realtors.

4. 2/3 of Prop 1 is for corridor beautification that does nothing for traffic congestion relief

\$482 million (2/3rds of the total) is for corridor beautification at a number of locations such as Airport Blvd, Burnet Rd, South Lamar, etc. Corridor beautification spending rises to over 85% of the combined \$1.8 billion package because the additional \$1.1 billion is solely for corridor beautification that will do nothing for traffic per Ben Wear's lead article in the September 25 Statesman.

I feel betrayed that our Council and Mayor are allocating over 2/3 of the Mobility Bond to corridor beautification and bike lane projects that do nothing for traffic congestion relief. I feel further betrayed by the lack of transparency that \$720 million is only Phase 1 of a combined \$1.8 billion package.

I love our City and I love beautifying it, but beautification is a luxury that needs to wait till our more serious traffic issues are properly addressed. On first hearing of this allocation, my wife Janet said out of frustration, “Austin doesn't need its nails done. It needs stents!”

There are at least 5 serious problems with the corridor beautification plans:

A. Some of the corridor beautification projects will increase congestion by reducing traffic lanes, e.g., from 3 lanes to 2 on Airport Blvd from I-35 to Manor Rd and on Riverside Dr east of I-35 as well. As one constituent of District 10 said, "At least we can enjoy the beauty while sitting in traffic."

B. The corridors will force many more of our poor to our City's periphery as the gentrification along the corridors raises real estate prices. Most of the proposed corridors are through poorer areas of our City. The Council and Mayor speak with forked tongue when they advocate affordable housing and then vote the Im-mobility Bond onto the ballot with its gentrifying corridors. The corridors will make Austin less diverse (and as one constituent said, more like White Bread City).

C. Long established businesses (many owned by minorities) along the corridors will be forced out of business due to the construction, reduced traffic, and reduced parking. This is what just happened to the venerable El Azteca Restaurant on East 7th Street.

D. As Ben Wear pointed out in his column in the September 26 edition of the Statesman, page B1, the \$482 million in the Mobility Bond for corridor beautification will only pay for a subset of the corridors. The Council will have to come back to us voters for funding Phase 2 and perhaps Phases 3 and 4. It's unlikely that \$1.561 billion will be the full and final cost of the corridors. Our City does not have a good track record of staying within budget on projects. Witness CodeNEXT. Meanwhile the Council will end up cherry picking which corridors and Council Districts should be done first, leaving the others twisting in the wind while their constituents pay higher property taxes.

E. Corridor beautification will enrich real estate developers of the properties along those corridors at taxpayer expense while we continue to languish at intersections through 3 or more light changes. The money to be made by the developers and real estate interests off the Mobility Bond is apparent when reading the fine print at the end of the glossy mailer sent to Austin households during the week of September 19 in support of the Im-mobility Bond. Four of the top contributors to the PAC that paid for the mailer are in Real Estate. We can connect the dots.

Because the property owners and developers will be enriched by the corridor beautification, why isn't the City asking that they share in the corridor cost rather than expecting us taxpayers to foot the whole bill. I would expect that their property values will increase enough to cover at least half of the cost.

5. It should have been split into 2 or 3 separate propositions

The Austin City Council should have split the Mobility Bond into 2 or 3 propositions for us to vote on – one for traffic congestion relief and safer intersections, and the other or others for corridor beautification, sidewalks and bike trails. The planners believed that the other propositions would not pass, so they bundled everything together in the hope that they could push the whole thing through in support of the special interests at the expense of our traffic relief.

Please Vote No on the Im-mobility Bond

Although our Mayor has said, “[The Mobility Bond] is in my mind not a perfect plan, but perfection should never be the enemy of good.”, it simply is a bad plan as summed up by the TxDOT manager, “The bond issue is not a rational response to our needs.”

There is a better way forward. It is the Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal that will not raise our taxes at all. I will work diligently with the other members of our City Council to achieve consensus and approve it for the November 2017 ballot, preferably even earlier.

To have hope of traffic gridlock relief and fewer traffic light changes to wait through, please vote NO on the \$720 million Im-mobility Bond. There is a better alternative – and it is a MUCH better way forward: the no-increase-in-taxes \$500 million Traffic Relief and Drainage Bond proposal.

[By Rob Walker (of D10), MBA Stanford in finance and PhD University of Texas in taxation.]