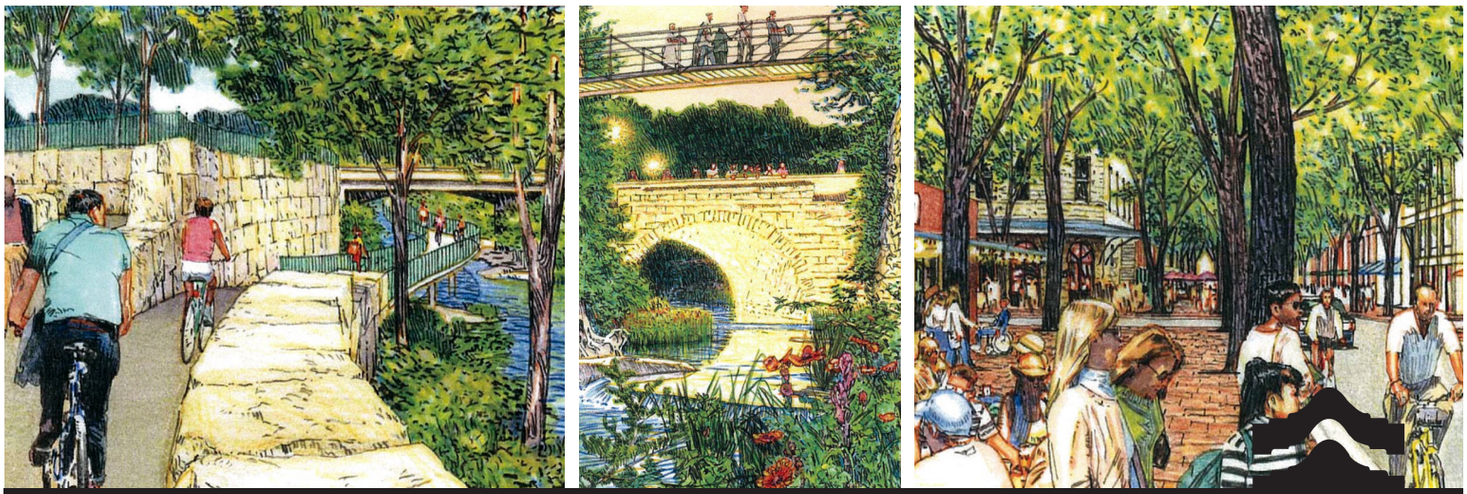

Waller Creek Tunnel Project

This plan is the legacy of many years of thinking about Waller Creek what it originally meant to the city, what it has become, and what it can be in the future.It is an outgrowth of a community process that has brought together many different people with many different points of view, united by the common understanding that Waller Creek has fallen short of its potential and that now, with the prospect of future flood control improvements, it can be reclaimed and reintegrated into the life of the city in a way that is uniquely Austin.

Vision for the Future

The primary importance in setting the direction for the future of Waller Creek is reinstating its environmental value as a natural feature within the urban landscape. The plan envisions the restoration of the ecological functions of the creek corridor and emphasizes its role as a living element with unique amenity value that can contribute significantly to the identity and livability of the city, and to the economic vitality of the Downtown. Eroded banks will be repaired and riparian landscape re-established where possible. Activities, rather than turning away from the creek, will be oriented to it.

The landscape of the creek corridor will also be augmented by the parkland associated with it. Palm Park, Waterloo Park, Symphony Plaza Park and Symphony Plaza will be improved to reinforce the ecological identity of the creek corridor and become more attractive places for activities. Smaller pieces of parkland will be enhanced as attractive settings for outdoor dining and other activities that also contribute to the sense of landscape continuity. Public spaces along and adjacent to the creek will provide places for families to gather, children to play and people to linger and socialize.

The Plan also calls for the improvement of pedestrian and bicycle linkages to, across and along the creek corridor to connect Lady Bird Lake with UT and East Austin and Rainey Street with Downtown. Along the creek corridor, the Plan promotes a light handed approach to the pathway system. It also recognizes the importance of utilizing multiple routes that allow some adjacent streets to become part of the open space system and serve as key elements in pedestrian/bicycle movement as well. In this manner, a more interesting, diverse and multi-faceted environment will be created.

The vision for the future is not to set the creek apart from the city and isolate it from its surroundings but rather to integrate it more fully with the surrounding urban life. The Plan calls for extending the amenity value of the creek, enabling it to be shared with the greatest number of people as possible. In the tighter portions of the creek, improvements are proposed that will reach out to embrace a broader domain with a more complex and finely scaled system of pedestrian connections. More meaningful and important roles are proposed for underutilized streets, new streets will be extended and block patterns completed, and public spaces and parks tied together to create more lively and engaged places for people.

The Tunnel Project, along with the improvements of the creek corridor, will create enhanced opportunities for redevelopment. The redevelopment of the private and public lands adjacent to the corridor is not only an important step in providing the economic basis for the tax-increment financing district, but is also important because it creates an intensity of activities and uses that will help enliven the creek corridor and create a more vital district. The Plan proposes a variety of different scales and types of uses, from live/work and small scale buildings to more intensive office and residential uses and cultural/institutional complexes. Terraced dining is encouraged adjacent to the creek, where it can be accommodated in keeping with the natural slope of the banks and the riparian vegetation. A broad spectrum of new development opportunities will contribute to the diversity of living and working environments in the city, will build a population with direct interests in the on-going quality of the creek corridor and will create a vibrant and vital place within the heart of the city.

With all of these planned improvements, the value of Waller Creek will be extended well into the surrounding community. It will become a linear park and a positive public space that enhances the image and identity of the City, gives additional structure and orientation to the urban experience, connects and reinforces activity centers, and serves as an attractive destination. It will then also be a catalyst for redevelopment and revitalization, a centerpiece of a revitalized east side of Downtown and an attractive amenity that helps to overcome the barriers that exist between Downtown and East Austin. The improvements will bring newfound richness and meaning to life on Waller Creek and will help instill a sense of pride in the community that is essential to the management and maintenance of this valuable resource over time.

Frequently Asked Questions

About the Project

The Waller Creek Tunnel Project is the very first step in transforming a part of Downtown Austin. The project is a storm water bypass tunnel that will capture and redirect flood waters south of 12th street and safely carry them to Lady Bird Lake. The project will begin in Waterloo Park where an inlet structure will take in flood waters and screen out trash and debris. Additional inlets between 4th and 5th Streets and between 8th and 9th Streets will capture additional flood waters. The tunnel will help prevent severe flooding and stream bank erosion by controlling the volume of water in the creek. It will empty the diverted waters into a lagoon on the shores on the Lady Bird Lake. A pump station at Waterloo Park will help improve water quality by maintaining a constant water flow in the creek at all times.

When complete, the tunnel will take nearly 28 acres of downtown land out of the 100 year floodplain and create and environment suitable for redevelopment. This structure is critical to the capture of the floodwaters and debris during a flood. Creek side inlets that are proposed between 8th & 9th Streets and 4th & 5th Streets. The diameter will be approximately 22 feet. The length of the tunnel is just over a mile and generally follows the path of the existing creek and Sabine Street. Aside from construction shafts at Waterloo Park, Waller Beach and the two creekside inlets and tunnel shaft at 4th and 5th, the construction will be done by boring methods that do not require excavation from the surface.

Construction is set to begin in June of 2010 and be operational in 2014.The project will also include amenities such as a new public boathouse and stream bank restoration. Once the risk of flooding is reduced, future plans call for restoring the ecology of the creek, improving adjacent parks and open spaces, and enhancing pedestrian and bicycle connections between Lady Bird Lake, the University of Texas, and East Austin. A safer, healthier, and more attractive creek will be the springboard for the creation of a vibrant and vital space within the heart of the city.

Project Schedule
The tunnel project is separated into several sub-projects, each with its own time line. The first project in the sequence is currently under construction and the last project in the sequence should be complete in 2014.

What Will It Look Like?
Through the construction of the Waller Creek Tunnel, extensive possibilities for development along the creek will become available. What will it look like? What amenities will be included? How will this be designed?

In 2008, the Austin City Council selected a Consultant to assist the City and the community in the creation of a vision and implementation strategy for the development of Waller Creek for the next 20 years. The Waller Creek District Master Plan was adopted on June 24, 2010 and will continue to be carefully coordinated with the Downtown Austin Plan.

Since the plan has been adopted, the implementation phase is currently underway. This includes drafting code amendments and criteria as recommended in the Development Standards.

Why is the tunnel needed?
Waller Creek can quickly go from calm conditions to a raging torrent during a storm event. Over the years, the creek has experienced several devastating floods and there have been fatalities, most recently in 2007. The lower portion of the creek ranks among the City's worst in terms of flooding, water quality, and erosion. Homes, businesses, and parts of some downtown parks adjacent to Waller creek are currently at risk for severe flooding. Along with the flood problem, the area also suffers from severe stream bank erosion and from large amounts of visible trash.

How will the tunnel enhance water quality?
The tunnel will operate as an "inverted siphon." During normal flows, water will move slowly through the tunnel and sediment will fall to the bottom of the tunnel. The sediment will be removed from the tunnel during normal maintenance activities. Trash will be collected at the tunnel inlet and at screened storm drains. During dry conditions, water will be pumped from the tunnel at the inlet and discharged into Waller Creek to maintain a constant flow in the creek, improving water quality and the appearance of the creek.

How much does the tunnel project cost?
The cost for construction is $106 million. The overall program cost is $146.5 million. (includes land acquisition, engineering, and project management. The tunnel project is funded through the Waller Creek Tax Increment Financing Zone.

How will the tunnel be constructed?
The tunnel will be constructed 60 to 70 feet underground using a Roadheader, which cuts through rock. The access for the excavation necessary for the tunnel will be between 4th and 5th Streets, a central point along the approximately one mile route of the tunnel. As a result, the excavation will not require trenching. Further, individuals on the surface will likely not realize excavation is taking place far below them.

What permits and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance are required for this project?
All permitting will be attained prior to issuing construction contracts. The project team will be attaining Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Army Corp of Engineers, Fish & Wildlife, and Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), whom administers NEPA requirements in Texas via the Texas Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (TPDES), permits and any others required during the commission phase of the project.

Will the project help the economic development of the City of Austin and Travis County?
The Waller Creek Tunnel Project will put hundreds of people to work, including engineers, construction managers, electricians, truck drivers, plumbers, computer specialists, safety inspectors, general laborers, traffic control specialists, and landscapers, to name a few. Once the tunnel is complete and the threat of flooding is reduced, the entire Waller Creek District will attract investors and live up to its potential as a vibrant, economically sound investment in Austin.

Illustrations and information taken from thew City of Austin executive Summary, June 2011.