

## North Central I-35 Neighborhood Coalition 2

Candidates Conversation

6 December 2014

Genesis Presbyterian Church, 1507 Wilshire Blvd.

Introduction by Mateo Barnstone, NCINC2 Chair

Drs. Deana and Kenneth Henry, Moderators

Attendance:

- Gregorio Casar, District 4 Candidate
  - Ora Houston, District 1 Candidate
  - DeWayne Lofton, District 1 Candidate
  - Mike Martinez, Mayoral Candidate
  - Nick Van Zandt, Policy Director for Steve Adler, Mayoral Candidate
- [NOTE: Kathie Tovo (District 9) and Laura Pressley (District 4 candidate) declined to attend]

1. *TxDOT is engaged in the Mobility35 process which will result in significant impacts throughout the entire City. How closely have you been following this process and in your opinion what is the appropriate role for the City as a critical stakeholder in TxDOT's plans and the future of IH35? Would you support the City's hiring of an independent engineering firm to review TxDOT's Mobility35 plans in Austin?*
  - **NVZ:** Following process closely; COA should be "strong stakeholder"; East-West connectivity; many engineering firms involved at TxDOT level, don't all represent interests of City; interested in looking into having COA engineering firm.
  - **MM:** East-West connectivity, effort to expand flow to highest possible capacity; "not prepared to commit to hiring consultant at this time"; start with City staff first: "that's what they're for"
  - **DL:** City has been partner in effort since the beginning; should play "integral role"; question of outside consultants—City has engineers on staff; not sure what NCINC2 concerns are that staff cannot address, but willing to explore hiring outside engineers if necessary; first look at City staff (prefer not to absorb cost of consultant if not necessary); hear all stakeholder voices for "complete" project
  - **GC:** "Oftentimes, city's attitude is one of defensiveness", need to be proactive; City impact will continue to grow—Council should carry that attitude forward; people are the ones funding these projects
  - **OH:** Been following IH35 process "for about seventeen years now"; important how we move people through the middle of our town; look at how various neighborhoods would be affected; would say "yes" to independent consultant because TxDOT does not always have the best interests of the people in mind

2. *When TxDOT presented its initial Mobility35 plans last year, concerned citizens identified a number of elements to the proposal that would have had significant negative effects on local traffic and east-west connectivity. The City's support in passing a resolution directing the City Manager to preserve east-west connectivity as a priority was a key factor in the decision by TxDOT to alter its initial plans. Will you continue to hold east-west connectivity as paramount in future interactions with TxDOT?*

- **MM:** East-West connectivity is highest priority—racial barrier, spending barrier; this is an opportunity to put an end to that;
- **DL:** East-West connectivity is a priority; D1 is primarily east district—how do we get people in and out? look at how we got to that point in the first place: engineers producing initial design looked to solve problems from engineering standpoint but not practical standpoint; want to hear input from community on what works and what doesn't
- **GC:** D4 straddles IH35; concern from voters over lack of access to basic services, retail, park space with IH35 acting as barrier; buying more parkland in D4 needs to have access to parks and IH35 prevents that; shouldn't be fixing one problem while undermining other needs; IH35 is "major landmark of our district"
- **OH:** "Yes, definitely yes"; "west has come over to east Austin", how do we get economic drivers east? Now "183 is the new 35"; tolling 183 would be even bigger divide than IH35 is now; no access to food, hospitals; must keep East-West in the plan
- **NVZ:** Yes; improving North-South mobility cannot come at cost of East-West movement; careful to not decrease connection between communities; consider impact of traffic on East-West corridors coming off of IH35;

3. *TxDOT plans to carry three design options for the downtown segment through the NEPA process: a no-build option, a depressed option and a modified existing option which would elevate IH35. Which of those three options do you favor?*

- **DL:** This is the most challenging question for D1; historically, IH35 has been "the great divide"; community has asked for years for something to be done about IH35 as divide; "stitches" at seventh didn't do much to bridge divide—they were "cute"; No-build not an option; Modified Existing presents challenges; Depressed is best option, but "are we doing it to fix traffic or because demographics have changed?" This issue will cause anxiety in community
- **GC:** "We are supposed to be the progressive center of the State"; interested in burying/depressing portions of IH35; new space should be parkland, accessible to all or provide housing to allow more people access to downtown; "can't afford to shy away from challenges"—affects traffic and housing; "be bold and take risks is the community is ready to come with us"
- **OH:** No-Build is not an option; Depressed has been on the table a long time; still issues that need clarification; Modified Existing only deals with part of IH35 plan—Cesar Chavez to 15<sup>th</sup> Street; would fully elevate; other options that we could consider—"put a

rail down I-35” regional rail line “really bold option”; Of 3 options, Modified Existing is preferred

- **NVZ:** No-build is not an option; too much congestion; Depressed option is appealing and “we should be looking further at that”; challenges of financing, where does traffic go? No other routes to mitigate traffic; depressed option is worth exploring
- **MM:** SH130 is underutilized and it’s going bankrupt—“why aren’t we having conversations about SH130 and IH35 at the same time?”; right now is only one new lane “we’ll have one more lane sitting in traffic”; supports idea of rail line down road; highway at grade is cheapest; depressed is x2 price; elevated is up to x4 price; estimate for depressing 15 blocks of IH35 is \$15 billion

4. *Austin has four voting members on the 20-member CAMPO Transportation Policy Board, raising concern that the City is proportionately underrepresented in regional mobility planning. If elected, would you want to be appointed to CAMPO and how would you maximize Austin’s influence within the Board in advancing a comprehensive regional mobility plan?*

- **GC:** D4 immediate concerns are jobs, public safety—not mobility, although it affects other things; would be quick to sign up if transit representation was clearly necessary; often, we’re not as strong at the negotiating table as we should be
- **OH:** No, not willing to be on CAMPO board; concerns are public health, services, small biz, jobs, focus efforts on that; lack of public transit is issue for D1, especially north and south; agree with Martinez that SH130 is underused; “cannot look at just one piece”; ex: hazardous materials route shouldn’t go through downtown; have to think about re-routing some of downtown traffic
- **NVZ:** CAMPO is important board and appointment would be “worth examining”; necessary for COA to have strong representation on CAMPO; worry of silo effect on Board with municipalities arguing for their own projects; need good working relationship with TxDOT; representation on CAMPO should be a priority
- **MM:** Wouldn’t *want* to, but I will and should as mayor; “I will vote as my council directs me to vote”; current mayor takes CAMPO positions against Council vote; until we have weighted system of voting that favors COA tax base, we’ll have to take strong positions; will work for weighted positions on CAMPO
- **DL:** Yes, only one African-American rep on Board; perspective needs to be heard; “toll roads have significant effect on African-American and Hispanic community”; gets imposed on community; Inner option for SH130 (not built) would have displaced more African-Americans, Hispanics because voices there did not have sufficient representation; extremely important to have African-American voices in CAMPO; representation of COA needs to be increased

5. *With regard to the failure of Proposition 1, how will you respond to the citizen concerns that led to the vote against the urban rail and highway bond proposal? What next steps do you propose for providing a high-quality, high capacity transit system in central Austin.*
- **OH:** People were too heavily burdened with taxes “tax fatigue”; separating into 2 options, one might have passed; people didn’t feel like they had input in decision of where rail was going; people in Colony Park, Decker were not involved in conversation; 10-1 will help that; Green Line is in CapMetro portfolio (Austin, Manor, Hutto); growth is downtown and northeast
  - **NVZ:** People outside urban core felt “plan would not have reached them”; others thought route was not best; failure cannot allow us to be complacent; 10-1 will bring new communities to the table, so future government is changing; ensure we are bringing communities together in bringing a new plan to the table; “cannot have situation where rail is not an option”
  - **MM:** Worked with CapMetro to put it on better financial footing; If Prop1 passes, CapMetro is ready; if P1 fails, CM has money to invest in other infrastructure; what is plan B; how to expand fixed bus service, what is future of BRT? Prop 1 got us advanced future studies and we know where transit riders will be in future; we “have to be best bus city in America”; Austin needs more rail, but “we just weren’t ready for it”
  - **DL:** Only D1 candidate to support Prop 1; “need vision for how City grows and how we move people around”; Prop 1 opposition is short-sighted; at some point we will need to have rail in Austin; where did it fail and why? Majority who voted against were east of IH35 (D1, 3, 4) important to engage those communities and communicate the value of a rail system; if system doesn’t touch a district, need to explain how system will still benefit “so they see it as a benefit and not just as a tax liability”; can’t just build roads
  - **GC:** Believe government has the ability to do good; school and rail bonds both failed—need the trust of the community in addition to progressive leadership; D4 people had high prop. Tax increases but don’t have much money; move of elections to November was an important move; if we want to talk about rail “we need to talk about trust in the community”
6. *IH35 has limited capacity, regardless of the Mobility35 plans. In considering North-South mobility in the region, what other options do you see to make better use of existing alternative routes through and around Austin?*
- **NVZ:** There have been significant increases in traffic flow at continuous intersections (i.e. diverging diamond, etc.) as well as improved safety—focus on innovative designs to better routes that exist
  - **MM:** SH130 is strongest opportunity for alleviating traffic on IH35; next best thing is a good bus system; MetroRapid hit a million passengers within eight months; CapMetro has deal to use HOV lanes on MoPac
  - **DL:** Need continued improvements to 183, currently expanding through Bergstrom Expressway; encourage more people to use SH130; “realistically, only 20% of truck

traffic is through town”; rest are going downtown; need to expand commuter and express bus routes north and south; people commuting from Hays, Williamson Counties, etc. Get them on commuter buses; look at demand management—work with employers to stagger work schedules.

- **GC:** Excited for possibilities of our bus system; “In D4, folks use the bus”; pay close attention to where people are living and where they are going; busses efficient and using the best technology available; keep buses separated from rest of traffic
- **OH:** Served on Imagine Austin Plan team—growth is east; how do we get people in Manor, Lockhart, Hutto, etc, in and out of Austin; 71 and 290 are both congestion problems; “think broader about north-south connectivity because people are moving east, east, east”

7. *Other than increasing the traffic capacity of IH35, what other transportation-related options should be in the toolbox and what would you like to see implemented?*

- **MM:** Not convinced that increasing lane capacity is going to improve mobility; building more roads doesn’t fix transportation problems; Green Line is important asset that CM already owns—along a future growth corridor; two other considerations: bicycling and walking; highest bicycle corridor is Manor east of IH35, safest bike crossing at IH35 is Dean Keeton underpass; need more options for people to use
- **DL:** We should use all tools available; look at travel demand analysis; too many people going to work at 8am; offices need to look at varying office hours, ten hour days, and/or telecommuting; look at roadway bottlenecks, especially at ramps; closing some ramps downtown helped—cities like Houston have their on/offramps miles apart; having lots of ramps close together is not efficient
- **GC:** Look at how to get people out of cars; cite poor sidewalk infrastructure at Fairfield Drive, for example; where do there need to be crosswalks, where are there lack of services; gaps add to the time that people have to get into traffic; Agree with Green Line and double-tracking Red Line; groups have had disproportionate power in some neighborhoods limiting e-w connectivity by closing through streets; look at unfunded projects like Oak Hill “Y”
- **OH:** look at employers for ride-share programs; transit-dependent people need to be able to get to major employers like Samsung and Dell
- **NVZ:** 6 years ago, Austin was 26<sup>th</sup> worst congestion city—now we’re 4<sup>th</sup>; need to get people out of cars and into buses; need to look at ways to not get on the road at all

*(Greg Casar had to depart at this point)*

8. *Regarding creating a comprehensive regional mobility plan, do you favor considering all transportation modes for major corridors and if so, what criteria do you propose for selection?*
- **DL:** Know what issue you are trying to address—Mueller example: bike routes because people in Mueller don't have to leave neighborhood to get to grocery, hospital, etc;
  - **OH:** Consider impact on workforce housing—how close are jobs to where people live? How do we talk about sprawl? Sprawl is still there but is now more lower class; wages are not sufficient to live in City; look at ways for low income spectrum to live in town
  - **NVZ:** Make sure we're getting people to their jobs and not just focus on limiting travel time; need interconnected points of multi-modal transportation
  - **MM:** "I support every mode of transportation"—they should all receive equal footing; "Airport Boulevard is like a highway with no sidewalks, no bike lanes, no other mode than vehicles—we're paying the price for that" Many other cases like this in Austin; we don't plan like that anymore but have to go back decades to correct mistakes for sufficient connectivity
9. *Austin is currently in the process of revising its existing Land Development Code through CodeNEXT. To what extent do you consider land use and transportation issues to be linked, and what specific changes to the Land Development Code do you support to help regional transit and transportation needs?*
- **OH:** "the linkages are there and they have to be there"; LDC rewrite is in process; not going to second-guess them; suggest that as LDC rewrite is taking place, Council should stop making decisions that will impact land development and send them to LDC team; ex: People are having to police their neighbors because short-term rentals are not getting proper permits; "wait and let process finish so we have good, sound development code"
  - **NVZ:** "Absolutely linked"; signed on with "Compact and Connected"; need more cooperation with range of planning efforts, including CAMPO; "priority we want to see is people connected, close to jobs, in homes they can afford"
  - **MM:** CodeNEXT could have dramatic impact on transportation; CapMetro ridership dips are by design e.g. increased density of West Campus and moving students closer to campus means less ridership; downtown residents now not using buses if they also work downtown; density sometimes means "less riders using public transit"; can't not move forward with good land development decisions "just so more people will ride the bus"
  - **DL:** Need to look at "where people are and where they need to be"; Austin should collaborate with other municipalities in MSA; share desires and directions for growth and planning; build a system of seamless transportation "intertwined"; kind of thinking we need for regional growth and development

10. *Several neighborhood associations favor the removal of the upper decks as part of a long term planning, citing the noise, pollution and mental and physical barriers. What sort of future do you envision for the upper decks?*

- **NVZ:** Would be “significant contribution to not have this wall” between east and west; should be prioritizing specific issues of noise and pollution reduction; need outreach with communities on these issues
- **MM:** In the near future, “the EPA may amend its standards for carbon standards and we’ll go into non-attainment very quickly” means losing Federal funding; don’t know that removing decks would improve air quality or congestion; happy to work with neighborhood associations but haven’t made decision on position for upper decks; Must think about effect on businesses
- **DL:** Empathize with neighbors near highway, especially regarding noise; realistically, not a lot we can do to take the upper decks down; would need to condemn property along IH35 to provide space for additional ground lanes; look into sound abatement strategies, including “quiet pavement”; ask Feds to study issue and suggest options; if only two options are tear them down or keep them there, think lowering lanes “would cause more of a problem than we’re trying to solve”
- **OH:** Neighborhoods continue to suffer environmental pollution; what would be the cost of tearing down upper decks and how would be demolish it in a safe manner; citizens are concerned about spending issues; also need to work with Federal government--“this is their road”

11. *What is one thing you would like us to take away from this meeting knowing about you and how you will be an advocate for Austin in the Mobility35 process?*

- **MM:** “Complete and comprehensive view” of transportation and transit; what I’ve done for last 4 years with CapMetro; Feds haven’t passed comprehensive transportation bill since 2006; burden is on us
- **DL:** “Willing to be bold and be visionary”; glad for groups that challenge leaders; want to ensure these conversations continue; good at listening; need to think about making citywide improvements
- **OH:** Am a bus rider—will be working with CM on future route discussions; “will be an advocate for the people of the district who are real and never get to come to a meeting”; sometimes we do not welcome people to participate because language and location are barriers
- **NVZ:** Federal funding has not been sufficient and has been less readily available; Steve will look to work with Feds to get project funding; at local level, need to provide resources for Austin’s considerable growth

Questions from the audience:

*Cherrywood: I have never owned a car and living in Austin is a real challenge. Many important services are hard to get to with public transit. What can be done to better educate the public and would a comprehensive public transit plan help people understand mobility options? Is there sufficient vision?*

- **DL:** Perception in communities is that big decisions happen behind closed doors and then try to gain support; people don't feel included; need to have better means of communicating with community, especially African American and Hispanic communities
- **OH:** Agree with Lofton that City has not gotten word to people first before plans are developed; "we make better decisions when there is a diversity of thought in the room"; ex: some wanted rail route from the Airport
- **NVZ:** Need "50,000 foot approach" to planning, to include not just transportation but also housing, water use, economic development, etc; plans need a form of implementation
- **MM:** Not many people can make it without a car; Have a 50-year visioning plan called Project Connect—includes all modes—Mayor chose to take on Prop1 as a measure of one line and downplayed full system; need people to think of public transportation completely differently; people don't complain when new schools or fire stations are built because they know they serve whole community; need people to think of transit in the same way

*Cherrywood: There has been talk of a "bold new approach" as well as conversation of fewer ramps to and from highway, including ramp at 38 ½ Street. Should we not ask TxDOT to eliminate many, if not all, of the ramps on the IH35 corridor and turn frontage roads over to City jurisdiction and planning?*

- **OH:** Closing all ramps would present a hardship; would like to separate TxDOT and local traffic
- **NVZ:** Need good working relationship with TxDOT
- **MM:** "Absolutely am supportive" of limiting ramps; should be exits at start and end of upper deck and 290 and 71 and downtown and not others; "should not allow TxDOT to dictate how Austin grows" by building more ramps than community needs or wants
- **DL:** Agree that we should have fewer ramps; "if you grew up here in Austin, 35 was your road"; it is the de facto transportation street to get to south Austin, etc. and that culture has been passed on to the new people who move here; need to re-train ourselves to say "don't get on 35" and use other routes before we can decrease reliance on the highway

*Notes submitted by Brendan Wittstruck, NCINC2 Secretary*