



March 1, 2007

County Judge Sam Biscoe
County Commissioner Ron Davis
County Commissioner Sarah Eckhardt
County Commissioner Gerald Daugherty
County Commissioner Margaret Gomez

From the Board of Liveable City:

In March, the Commissioners Court will consider a proposal from the City of Austin to enter into a TIF partnership to construct a flood-control tunnel for Waller Creek from Waterloo Park to Town Lake. The board of Liveable City strongly encourages the Commissioners to support the proposed partnership and project, subject to certain conditions.

For many years, the section of Waller Creek south of 15th Street has been an area of blight, and the once pristine waterway is contaminated with trash and broken glass. Waller Creek has the potential to be a gem in our community, as well-loved and well-used as Barton Springs and the Town Lake trails. Yet for years, its potential has been unrealized due to the lack of a reliable way to regulate its waters and contain flooding.

A tunnel to address these problems has been proposed on several occasions, yet was always rejected as too costly – though in hindsight, previous proposals sound like bargains. It is time to make a public investment in Waller Creek, to regain safe and pleasant access to a natural waterway that Central Texans will enjoy for generations. The price for this construction project will not get cheaper if we wait.

Such public investments must have guaranteed public returns. We do not believe the County should enter into this project without ensuring that tax dollars will result in substantial public benefit, and we oppose any agreement that is structured in such a way that a disproportionate share of benefits goes to private investors, rather than the citizens of Austin and Travis County. We believe that any plan for the Waller Creek area must include strong public participation in its design and reflect community values.

Therefore, we recommend that any County participation in this project be contingent on, though not limited to, the following specified conditions:

1. Public access to the creek via a continuous greenway/hike-and-bike trail and walkway for the length of the project must be maintained. Private property owners who will benefit from this project should be willing to commit land to a reasonable public right-of-way along the length of the creek.
2. Commercial or retail development along the creek should be comprised of local businesses. Austin's future Riverwalk should not lose Austin's unique, homegrown character.

3. 25% of housing in the TIF area must be affordable. Nonprofit affordable housing providers using both federal and local affordable housing resources could ensure homes for renters including those below 60% of regional median family income.
4. Development plans for the TIF area should include citizen input and take place within an open and transparent public process.

The proposed Waller Creek Tunnel has the potential to be enjoyed by residents and visitors alike for years to come. We strongly urge the County to become a partner in the vision for Waller Creek, while ensuring that solid public benefits will derive from this important investment.

The board of Liveable City:

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