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North Austin stimulus project to be finished after Obama leaves office

Posted: 2:48 p.m. Friday, July 3, 2015

By [Marty Toohey](#) - American-Statesman Staff

Meg Davis and Chris Lovin picked their way through the undergrowth, stepping carefully over the uneven and muddy terrain. As they did, their voices oscillated between optimism about the North Walnut Creek Trail and discouragement that progress on a “shovel ready” project can be described in terms of decades.

“What I see down there is a lot of false starts,” said Lovin, pointing to a section of the trail where tangles of abandoned concrete chunks, exposed rebar and orange safety netting sit in the waters of Walnut Creek in North Austin.



The unfinished North Walnut Creek Trail is interrupted by drops in elevation.

“There’s just so much potential with this trail” if properly built, said Lovin, a board member of the Walnut Crossing Neighborhood Association. “This could be huge for our neighborhood.”

“But we’re encouraged by the direction (the project) has taken” recently, added Davis, president of the Milwood Neighborhood Association.

When finished, phase 1 of North Walnut Creek Trail will be a paved 3.2-mile, hike-and-bike path running roughly east-west, through the greenbelt between Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park and Balcones District Park. Roughly \$1.9 million for the project came from the landmark public works initiative that Barack Obama campaigned on during his 2008 presidential run. But most of it won’t be finished until early next year, and the rest of phase 1 is slated to wrap up in early 2018 – when Obama no longer occupies the White House.



Residents of the Milwood neighborhood, from left, Meg Davis, Kernan Hornburg, Betty Lovin, 6, and her father, Chris Lovin, walk the ... [Read More](#)

That is partly because a rare salamander was added to the list of federally protected animals, requiring additional federal review of a portion of the trail. A sewer project was also folded into the project, to avoid the possibility of the city finishing the trail only to subsequently damage a portion of it.

But the root issue is a dispute between the city and the companies originally hired to build the trail. That disagreement ended with the city starting over — with the project’s budget **growing over the years** from \$4 million to \$5.9 million to, now, an estimated \$7.1 million. That is in addition to the \$1 million spent on work that was scrapped.

District 7 City Council Member Leslie Pool, who took office in January, held a public hearing earlier this year on the project at neighbors’ request. She and neighbors say that hearing has led to better communication and a sense that the project is no longer suffering from “energy attrition.”

Long road to trail project

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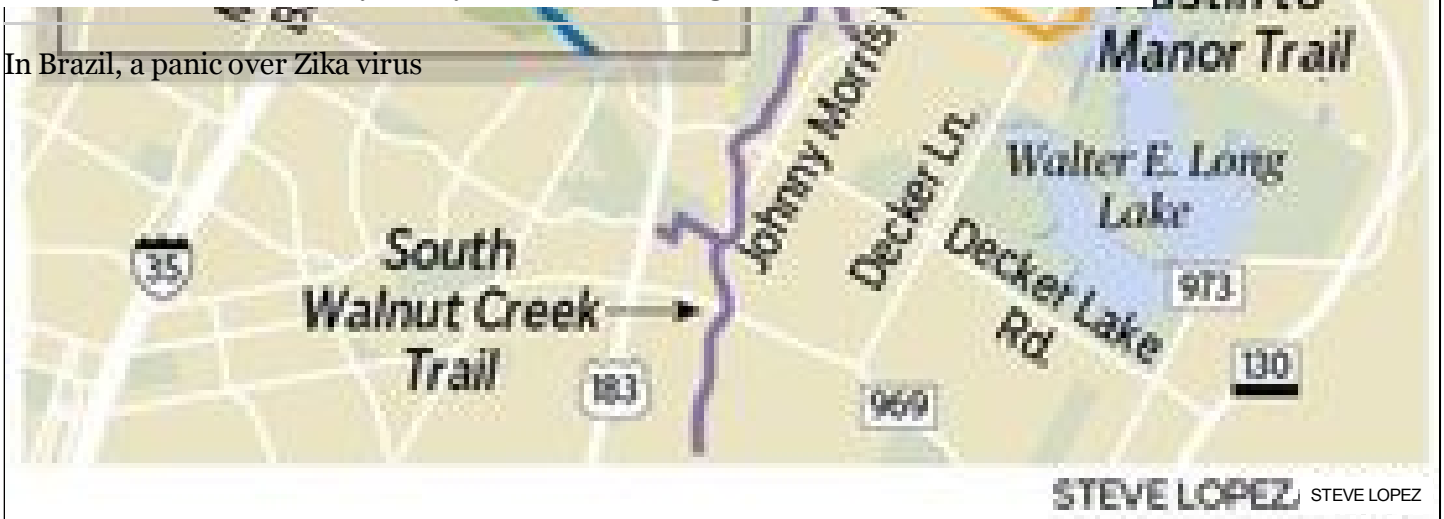
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Long road to trail project

Four of the nine bridges on the North Walnut Creek Trail are now finished. Some things are still being worked out – at neighbors' request, the city is considering ditching plans to elevate a portion of the trail

high enough for bicyclists to see into backyards – but, “to the best of my understanding, things seem to be moving forward,” Pool said.

They have been halted several times since 2002, when, after years of discussions, the City Council authorized hiring Austin landscape architecture firm Larson, Burns and Smith (then called Larson/Burns) to design the trail. The city was to pay for the design, while construction was supposed to be funded through federal transportation grants. But after funding cuts, those grants never arrived.

Then, in 2009, the trail suddenly seemed ready for the fast track. The Texas Department of Transportation deemed it eligible for funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. But to get that money, the city had to put together a bid package for construction in less than a month.

The city hired the contractor with a goal of starting work in May 2010 and finishing a year later. But city inspectors subsequently found the plans lacking. City rules require construction plans to show the location of trees with a circumference of at least 8 inches, so the city can determine whether simple changes could spare those slated to be cut down. The architects identified 79, but the plans were missing at least 400 others, including some protected “heritage trees” that cannot legally be removed without a special permit.

Work was halted. In June 2011, the city fired the architecture firm, which was paid more than \$750,000. The city also parted ways with the contractor, Westar Construction Inc., whose owner contended the city failed to properly review the flawed plans or address concerns.

The city found no fault with the contractor, which was paid \$330,000. Nor did the city pursue legal action against the architecture firm, deciding the cost of hiring attorneys and experts wouldn’t be worth the returns, city spokesman Bryce Bencivengo said.

Public Works Director Howard Lazarus cautioned that the project’s resurrection might not be swift because the city was essentially starting over. In 2013, the City Council authorized hiring a new contractor. The city is still designing portions of the project, but most of it is scheduled to be finished in January 2016.

The western end, in Balcones Park, won’t be finished until 2018 because the federal government added the Jollyville Plateau salamander to the list of threatened species in 2013. That designation requires additional environmental review of work around the spring in Balcones Park where the salamanders live, said Roxanne Cook, a Public Works division manager overseeing the project. The city has also combined the work in the park with a \$5.4 million expansion of the area’s sewer lines.

“It’s an issue of efficiencies,” Cook said. “If we constructed this (portion of the trail) a year ago, it would have been damaged” by the sewer project.

Cook said the city is also planning future phases that will extend the North Walnut Creek Trail to its southern counterpart, creating a system that will run all the way to East Austin’s Govalle Park. Lovin, the Walnut Crossing board member, has cycled along the southern trail, which is finished, “and it’s great,” he

said.

Lovin said he has similar hopes for the northern trail — and he hopes work proceeds swiftly enough that he can use it to teach his daughter, Betty, to ride a bicycle.

She is now 6, he said.

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An incredible trail north connects with an amazing trail east. The connected trails south are a generational legacy. So that's north, south, east and ? Yes, the missing word is west. The missing connected trails are west. Yes, they may be challenging, yet isn't the whole idea of 10-1 recognizing the rebalancing between the City as a whole and the neighborhood sectors

and the natural shifting occurring as new areas are annexed (and services need to be expanded or redistributed).

Aside from largely closed to the public preserve habitat, West Austin is significantly underweighted historically City services from fire response times (I mean real times including real traffic - God help you if a big fire rolled down 2222 - no amount of talent can help you if they can't get to you), improved park facilities, libraries, trails, bike lanes, sidewalks, etc., That said, they carry a heavy tax load.

10:04 p.m. Jul. 3, 2015



Texas_Watches

[Report](#)

Jollyville Plateau salamander make good bait.

7:33 p.m. Jul. 4, 2015



bigrickace

[Report](#)

The city is planning to extend north walnut Creek trail all the WAY to Govalle in East Austin But there is NO Safe accessible route from Mason & Lesdesma neighborhood where two children were involved in separate auto/bike accidents, one resulting in injury and the other in the death of a child. Still no action from the COA at this unsafe intersection, which by the way is less than a mile from Govalle Park; the southern walnut Creek trail needs to connect to this neighborhood.

11:55 p.m. Jul. 4, 2015

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