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## Price tag rising for long-delayed North Austin trail project



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10:00 p.m. Friday, Feb. 1, 2013 | Filed in: **News**

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After four years of delays, work is about to resume on a North Austin bike trail that now comes with a significantly larger price tag.

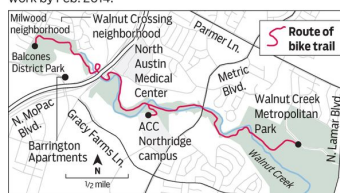
The City Council is poised to approve a \$5.9 million contract for the Northern Walnut Creek Trail. Of that, \$1.9 million comes from a 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant after the federal government deemed the project "shovel ready." Since then, the city-financed portion has risen to \$4 million from \$2.1 million, which includes about \$760,000 paid to an architect for plans that were deemed unsatisfactory and were discarded.

A messy divorce between the city, the project's contractor and the architect held up the project shortly after construction began. The council is expected to vote Feb. 14 on the new contract, with work now scheduled to be complete by early 2014.

The 3.2-mile hike-and-bike trail is now a clear-cut, 20-foot-wide swath, along with some partially buried metal rods and concrete along the creek. When finished, it will connect Balcones District Park and Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park, giving residents safe passage across MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1) and a convenient route to places like Austin Community College.

#### Northern Walnut Creek bike trail

A 3.2-mile North Austin bicycle trail, partially financed by a federal stimulus grant, remains unbuilt and, after numerous delays, the city has hired a new contractor to finish the work by Feb. 2014.



Walnut Creek Bike Trail

LINDA SCOTT / STAFF

"We're still really excited about this project. We've stuck with it this long because it's going to be a great amenity for the area," said Keri Juarez, assistant director of the Public Works Department, which took over management of the project from the Parks and Recreation Department in 2011.

But some residents have concerns about some of the project's details. Kernan  
trail as high as 19 feet, which is above

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Ralph Barrera

The Austin City Council will vote later this month on a \$5.9 million contract to finish the partially built North Walnut Creek trail, a project that neighbors, including Javier Bonafont, have been waiting on for years.

"They said they needed to get going (on the project) to hang onto the stimulus money, and we didn't try to hold up the plans," Hornburg said. "They've promised they'll make changes as they go. It's basically, 'trust me.'"

The Walnut Creek Trail saga dates back to 2002. The City Council authorized hiring Austin landscape architecture firm Larson, Burns and Smith (then called Larson/Burns) to design the trail. It was to be the northern spur of a 12.5-mile trail network. The city

planned to pay for the design; construction was supposed to be funded through federal transportation grants. But after funding cuts, those grants never arrived.

After the project languished for years, the federal government awarded the \$1.9 million stimulus grant in 2009. Work was to start in May 2010 and finish a year later. But after city inspectors found the plans didn't meet city requirements, work was halted and officials declared the plans inadequate. The job was further complicated because the city had allowed agreements to expire that permitted work crews to access construction areas by crossing properties owned by Austin Community College and the Barrington Apartments.

The city fired the architect. It also parted ways with the contractor, Round Rock-based Westar Construction Inc., whose owner contended the city was negligent in reviewing flawed plans and unwilling to listen to concerns. The city paid Westar \$329,000, and the city is still trying to recoup the roughly \$760,000 it paid Larson, Burns and Smith, Juarez said.

Juarez said the project isn't significantly different than it was three years ago, except that some of the ramps spanning marshy areas will be lengthened. She said that the city will also be working with neighbors during construction and that, during the early phases, plans could be altered to meet their concerns.

Even the hiring of the new contractor went more slowly than planned — in July 2011, the city was predicting it would have a contractor hired by December 2011 and would finish the project late last year.

**THE NORTHERN WALNUT CREEK TRAIL IS ONE OF 793 FEDERAL STIMULUS AWARDS AWARDED FOR USE IN TRAVIS COUNTY, ACCORDING TO RECOVERY.GOV, THE FEDERAL WEBSITE THAT TRACKS SPENDING FROM AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT OF 2009. ACCORDING TO THE WEBSITE, OF THE \$1.67 BILLION AWARDED FOR TRAVIS COUNTY: \$890 MILLION HAS BEEN SPENT ON FINISHED PROJECTS; \$689.9 MILLION IS BEING SPENT ON PROJECTS THAT ARE STILL IN PROGRESS; AND \$85 MILLION WAS AWARDED FOR PROJECTS, INCLUDING THE WALNUT CREEK TRAIL, THAT HAVEN'T BEEN STARTED.**

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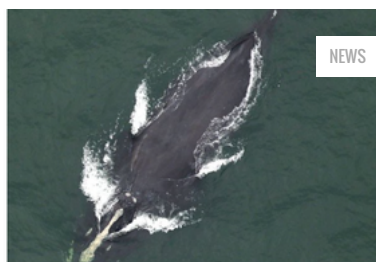
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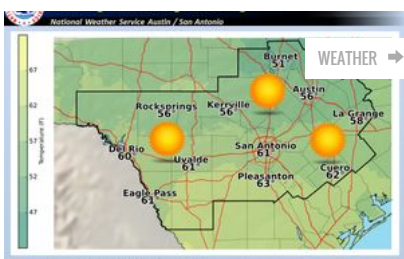
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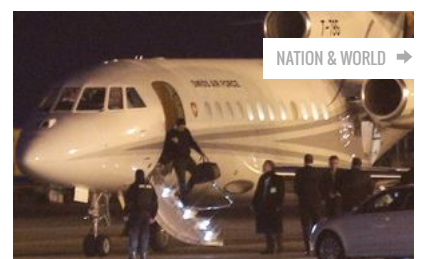
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