



Aesthetics Working Group Summary Report

I-35 Aesthetics Plan

Rundberg Lane to Woodland Avenue

Austin District, Travis County

May 2017

AESTHETICS WORKING GROUP REPORT

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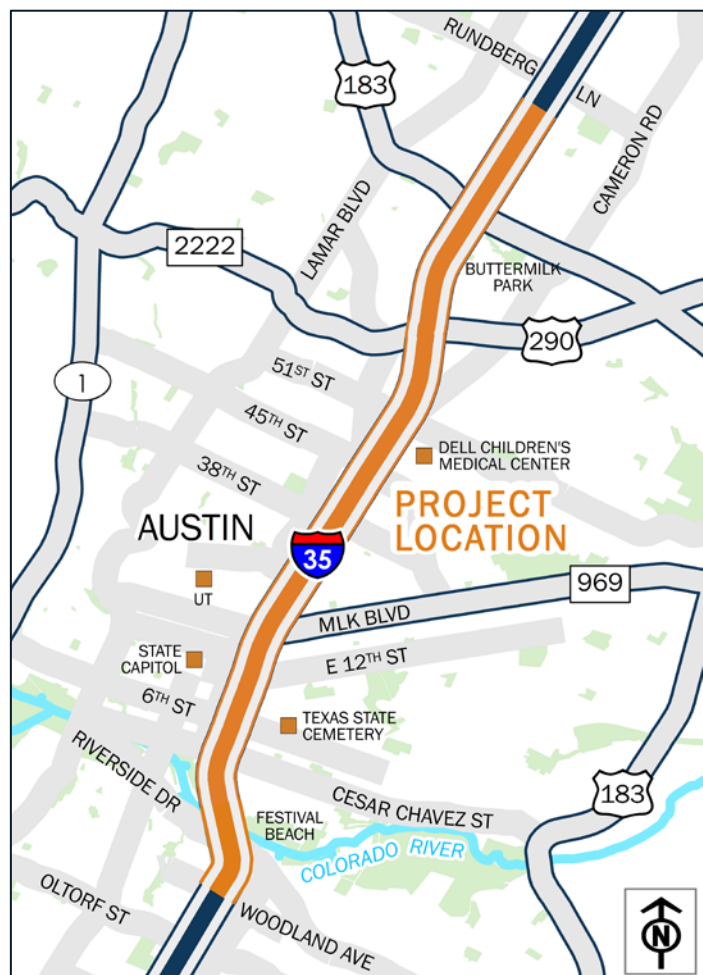
AESTHETICS WORKING GROUP OVERVIEW

Under the Mobility35 program, the Texas Department of Transportation is working on over 40 projects planned to address congestion and enhance safety along and across I-35 spanning 79 miles of the Capital Area through Williamson, Travis, and Hays counties.

The last major improvement to I-35 in central Austin was the addition of the upper decks in 1974, and the area is a mix of different looks from various projects over the preceding decades. Under Mobility35, I-35 between Rundberg Lane and Woodland Avenue could see substantial new construction that will include new bridge structures, hardscape, retaining walls, lighting, landscape, railings, etc. Since TxDOT has some flexibility in the aesthetic of these elements, the department reached out to the community to provide input on these choices. Aesthetic designs for these elements are generally necessary to any TxDOT project and aesthetics are typically a relatively small component of overall project cost.

TxDOT sent invitations to local organizations and government entities at the end of October 2015 to request their participation in five Aesthetics Working Group (AWG) meetings between December 1, 2015 and August 10, 2016. The AWG provided one of several opportunities for the community to assist in the development of three potential aesthetic concepts along the I-35 corridor and within the existing I-35 right-of-way (ROW). These three concepts were put to a community-wide vote by electronic survey held from July 14, 2016 to August 9, 2016. The result of the survey was a single aesthetic concept that will be the basis of the technical aesthetic guidelines provided to specific project development teams preparing detailed design plans within the boundaries of Rundberg Ln and Woodland Ave.

For projects north and south of central Austin, recent projects provide existing templates for what any new improvements should look like—for example the red brick of Kyle's bridges, the classic open bridge railings through Georgetown, and the Ben White interchange.



Aesthetics Plan Project Area Map

WORKING GROUP MEETINGS, SUPPORTING PUBLIC OUTREACH, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the year-long process, the AWG and public arrived at a Capitol themed concept being chosen as the preferred aesthetic treatment for the corridor. The community ranked lighting (for safety and to highlight aesthetic elements, not the lighting fixtures themselves), landscape plantings, and concrete wall panels as the three elements where aesthetic upgrades are most important.

The Capitol concept's hardscape aesthetic is inspired by the architectural design surrounding the Capitol building with arched openings, implied columns, radially-symmetrical paving patterns, and ornamental steel fencing. Native landscaping will be implemented in every feasible location available along the constrained corridor. The plants that are chosen for the corridor will be inspired by Central Austin's natural corridors while always being mindful of maintenance concerns in such a well-travelled thoroughfare. Green infrastructure and sustainable design, as part of TxDOT's standard practices, will also be implemented as part of all aesthetic treatments along the corridor wherever possible.

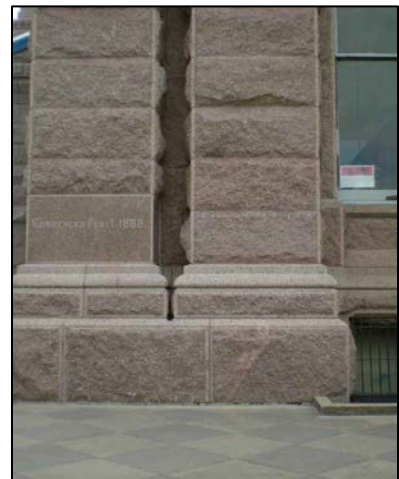
The Capitol concept will be translated into Aesthetic Technical Guidelines that include specific details of the bridge bents and beams, sign structures, retaining and abutment walls, safety barriers, ornamental trellis, hardscape, illumination, and landscaping and irrigation. Final alignments and construction elements including aesthetic opportunities may vary for specific projects along the corridor. Actual project details will be subject to design constraints, funding availability, and maintenance agreements with local partners. Installation of signature design elements such as landscaping and trellis may require assistance or sponsorship from partnering agencies and organizations. The following pages highlight key elements of the Capitol theme concept.



Capitol rotunda



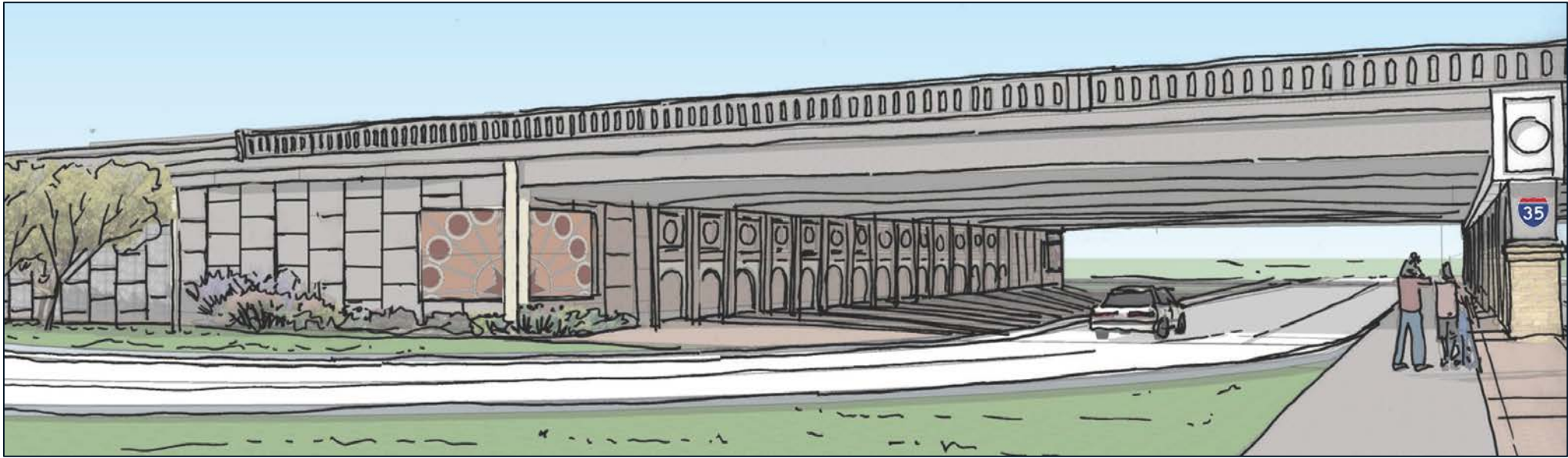
Capitol Building



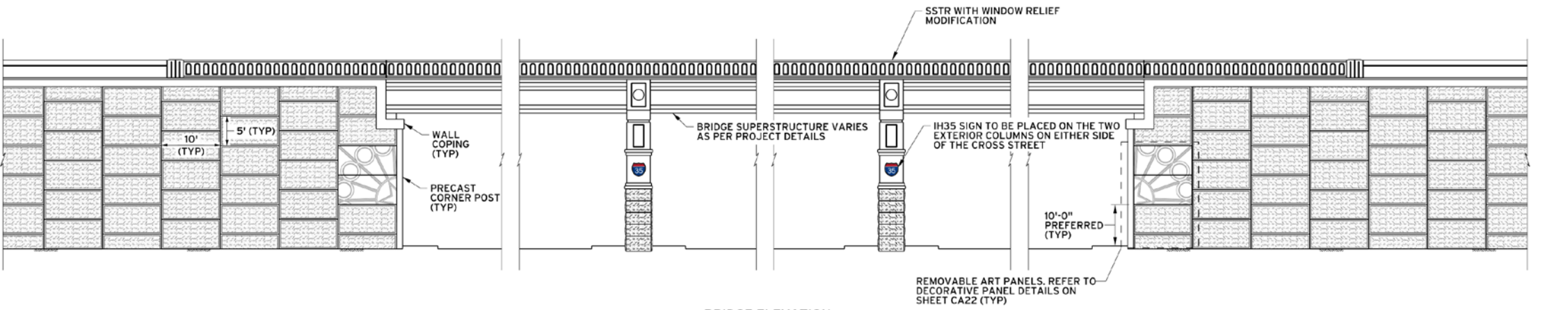
Stone texture and paving



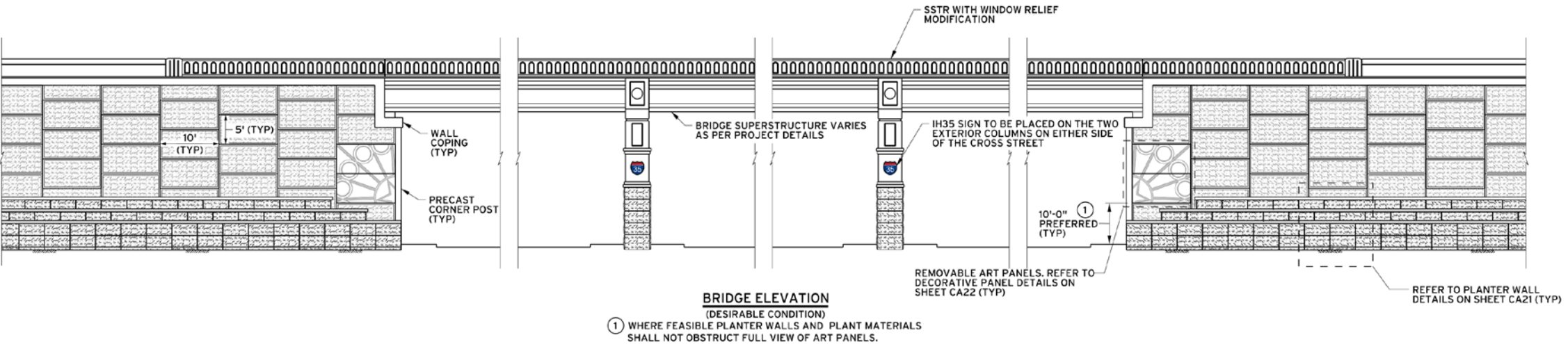
Fencing on the Capitol grounds



Artistic rendering of the preferred Capitol concept



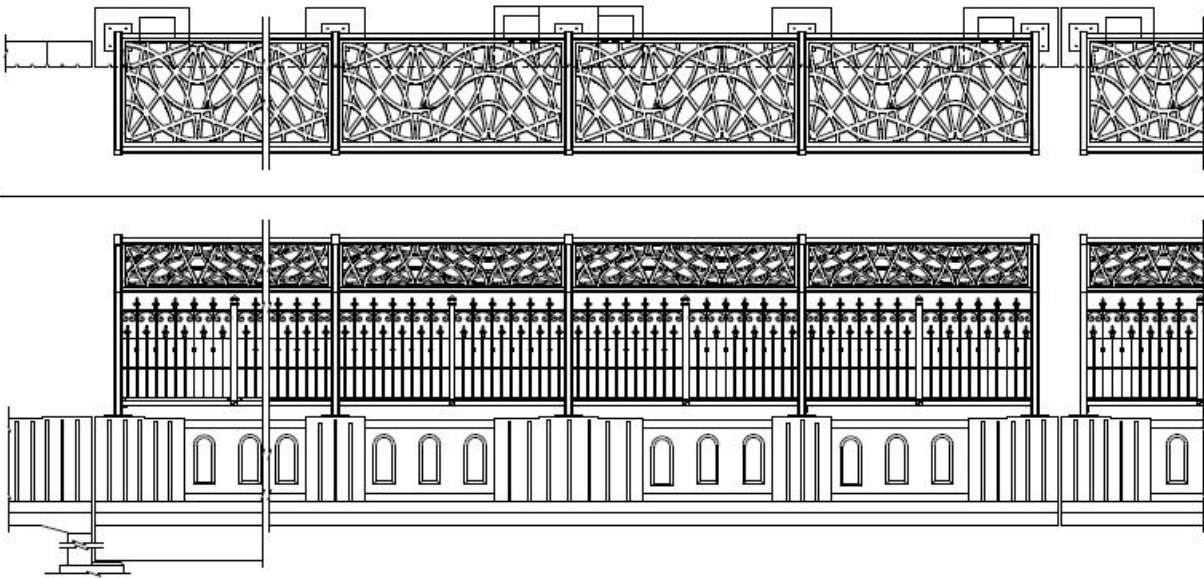
BRIDGE ELEVATION
(MODERATE AND/OR CONSTRAINED CONDITION)
Approach perspective



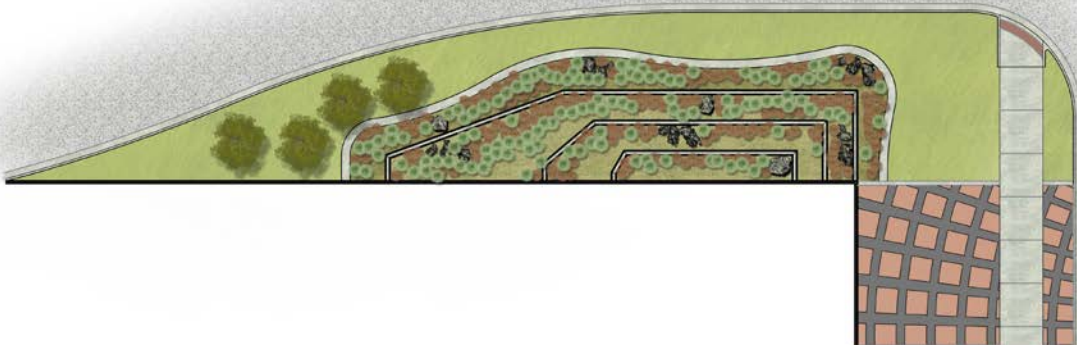
Approach perspective, showing addition of planter wall where space, funding, and maintenance are not constraints



Texas Classic bridge railing



Trellis details (plan and elevation)



Conceptual planting at desirable location illustrating planter walls

AESTHETIC WORKING GROUP MEMBERS AND MEETINGS

Invitations to participate in the AWG were e-mailed or mailed to 33 organizations and government entities in October 2015. The invitations requested that each group choose a single representative to attend the upcoming workgroup as well as commit to attending four additional workgroup meetings.

The AWG brought many varied and distinct perspectives to the table, including ideas from urban neighbors, diverse users, and local entities. Of the 33 groups that were invited to participate in the AWG, the groups and names of the representatives that agreed to participate are listed below.

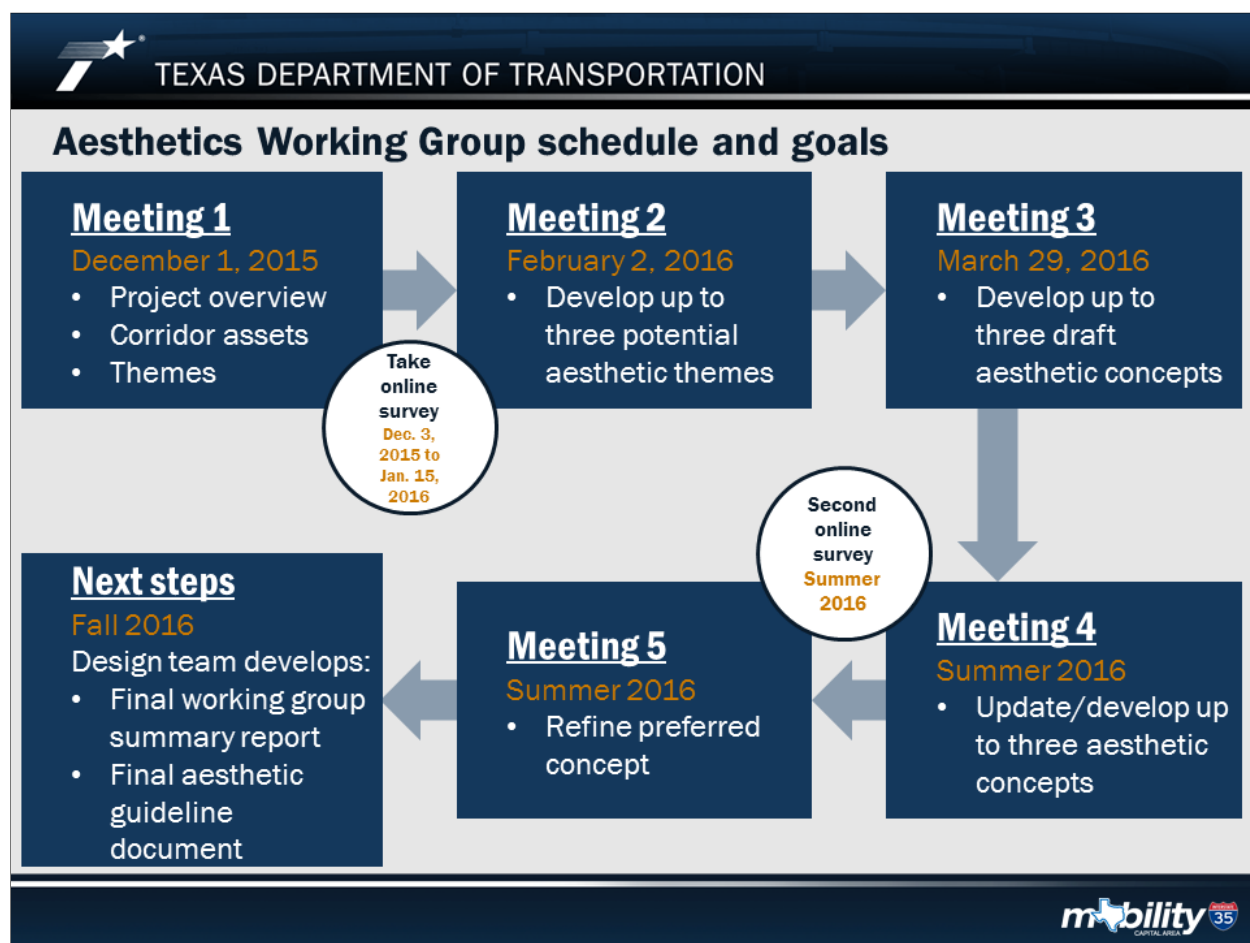
| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Meghan Wells | Art in Public Places |
| Bill Mullane/Dr. Ben Ferrell | Austin Community College |
| Dennis McDaniel | Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau |
| Mike Valescu | Austin Neighborhoods Council |
| Miller Nuttle | Bike Austin |
| Juan Garza | Central Health |
| Hilary Andersen/Sophia Benner | City of Austin Bicycle Advisory Council |
| Girard Kinney | City of Austin Pedestrian Advisory Council |
| Thomas Butler/Melissa Barry | Downtown Austin Alliance |
| Jeremy Martin | Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce |
| Rodney Ahart | Keep Austin Beautiful |
| Brendan Wittstruck | North Central I-35 Neighborhood Coalition 2 |
| Nate Jones | Organization of Central East Austin Neighborhoods |
| AJ Bingham | Real Estate Council of Austin |
| Heyden Black Walker | Reconnect Austin |
| Paul Byars | The Congress of the New Urbanism – Central Texas |
| David Rea | The University of Texas at Austin |
| Scheleen Walker | Travis County Department of Transportation and Natural Resources |
| John Rigdon | Waller Creek Conservancy |

The goal of the I-35 Aesthetic Working Group was to provide an additional opportunity for community input into the development of aesthetic guidelines by identifying corridor assets and general themes, developing three concepts to take to a public vote, and refining the final concept. The refined concept would become the basis for aesthetic technical guidelines.



AWG meetings 1-4 were held at the TxDOT Austin District, Building 7 Public Hearing Room located at 7901 N IH 35, Austin, TX 78753. AWG #5 was held at the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority boardroom located at 3310 N IH 35, Suite 300, Austin, TX 78705. Meetings began at 5:30 p.m. and ended at either 8:00 p.m. or 8:30 p.m.

The following graphic displays the schedule and overall goals of the AWG.



Each AWG meeting focused on specific topics, along with work group activities to foster discussion and input from the members in the development of aesthetic guidelines. Throughout these meetings, the AWG developed themes that highlighted certain elements and concepts they felt important, and the themes gradually evolved into a concept approach. The AWG meetings are described in further detail in the **Working Group Meetings and Supporting Public Outreach** of this report.

WORKING GROUP MEETINGS AND SUPPORTING PUBLIC OUTREACH

Aesthetics Working Group Meeting #1 – December 1, 2015

Project overview, corridor assets, and themes

At the initial AWG meeting, group members were introduced to the project and educated on TxDOT's aesthetic guideline process. They brainstormed ideas for aesthetic themes by discussing the question "What is the corridor to you?". They also identified important and influential community assets along the corridor by spending time discussing themes they thought were relevant to the downtown, decks, and northern portions of the project area. Members generally wanted to focus aesthetic treatments on the east/west crossings and

frontage road experience. The AWG also helped the design team refine the first online survey.

Online Survey #1 – December 3, 2015 to January 15, 2016

Over 2,100 participants completed the first online survey. The respondents answered questions on how, when, and why they are currently using I-35. This survey consisted of ten questions pertaining to the use of I-35 and the aspects the public would like to see developed into the new I-35 aesthetic. Some of the key takeaways from the survey were:

- When asked what the I-35 corridor meant to them, 95% of respondents said “traffic/congestion.”
- Around 56% of respondents use the I-35 corridor once or twice daily; 27% say they don’t use I-35 at all. Approximately 67% of respondents avoid I-35 as much as possible.
- Approximately 75% of respondents use the I-35 mainlanes most often.
- Average time spent on the corridor: 0 minutes (20%), 1 to 15 minutes (24%), 16 to 30 minutes (20%), and over 30 minutes (36%).
- Approximately 98% of respondents say they travel north or south on I-35 using a car while 96% say they use a car when traveling across I-35 east or west. Additionally, when traveling east/west across I-35, there was an increase in the number of users who travel by bicycle (14% vs 4%) or walking (11% vs 3%) when compared to traveling north/south.
- The top three aspects of Austin culture respondents would like to see incorporated into the I-35 Aesthetics Guidelines are 1) connectivity, 2) nature, and 3) green infrastructure. Each of these options were chosen by at least 55% of respondents.

In addition to the online survey, three locations were available for the public to take Online Survey #1. At each of the three locations, two members of staff occupied a booth to provide background information, answer general questions, and provide instruction on how to participate in the survey. The public had the option to take the survey on site by using a mobile tablet, complete a paper copy of the survey by hand, or sign up to receive a link to the online survey via e-mail.

Aesthetics Working Group Meeting #2 – February 2, 2016

Develop up to three potential aesthetic themes

During AWG #2, participants were given a quick lesson on the types of aesthetic elements the Aesthetics Plan could influence along the I-35 corridor. They were shown examples of elements such as guardrails, mask walls, retaining walls, bent caps, columns, landscapes, barriers, guardrails, coping, retaining walls, abutments, and rip rap treatments. Participants

were told which of these elements could be changed in the development of the new aesthetic guidelines along each of the different scenarios of I-35 (raised roadway, lowered roadway, and mainlane decks sections, as well as east/west crossings at grade and raised). Participants were also advised which elements could have the most substantial impact, and these included vertical walls, east/west crossings, and the shared use path environment. They were then shown several examples of aesthetic treatments of each of these elements.

After discussing the above information and the online survey results, the AWG came up with three conceptual themes for the design team to refine for AWG Meeting #3. These themes included connectivity, nature, and art.

Considerations discussed regarding *connectivity* included:

- Over-signage could create a cluttered look and adjacent wayfinding such as the city of Austin's program must be considered
- Location-specific items such as unique signage could be more costly to fabricate and replace over time

Considerations discussed regarding *nature* included:

- Landscaping along the corridor requires a partnership with the city of Austin for maintenance
- Constrained urban environment and space provide limited opportunities for planting and maintaining robust natural features
- Water usage may be a concern for the city under water restrictions

Considerations discussed regarding *art* included:

- Artists/partners would need to be identified in order to create, install, and fund pieces
- Timing of art installations would need to coincide with construction to avoid providing a blank palette for graffiti
- Art along the corridor requires a partnership with the city of Austin for maintenance
- Graffiti/defacement of art may trigger painting over with minimal opportunity for the artist to repair the art piece
- Artwork may only be installed where it is not a distraction to drivers

The AWG expressed their wishes to incorporate green infrastructure and sustainability into all three conceptual themes. Therefore, the following potential opportunities were discussed:

- Use native plantings which require minimal or no irrigation and support wildlife
- Integrate green imagery on wall panels and add gabions to soften the impact of concrete surfaces
- Construct bio-swales and install vegetation at abutments where feasible
- Designate wildflower and no-mow areas

- Feature sustainable agriculture (farm field themes) on wall panels
- Feature pollinators with honeycomb pattern wall panels and incorporate pollinator plants into the design
- Utilize multi-modal improvements including expansion of bike accessibility and safety, improved pedestrian connections, and transit corridor extensions
- Use a light-colored concrete to reduce heat island effect
- Use LED lighting which minimizes energy usage

The design team presented the AWG with photographs of structural elements that could have substantial impact on the aesthetic design, including east/west crossings and shared use path environments. Many of the examples included concrete representations of natural elements, such as bridge columns that resemble tree trunks and retaining walls adorned with leaf patterns. Several members of the AWG noted that, per the standard TxDOT process, aesthetic elements are a separate entity from the actual freeway's technical and structural design process. They explained their wish to involve a commissioned artist early in the design process. TxDOT staff briefly revisited the aesthetic guidelines process covered in the first AWG meeting which describes the role of aesthetics in freeway projects as the "skin" of fundamental facilities that, for the past decades, have carried thousands of vehicles and tons of freight per day.

The AWG added the following additional elements to their list of structural elements that could have a substantial impact on aesthetic design:

- Landscape design and performance
- Bridges as viewed from the I-35 mainlanes
- Wayfinding
- Lighting
- Vertical walls

The AWG also emphasized their strong preference for authenticity of materials. For example, where concrete is used, it should resemble concrete only, and any nature theming should truly be nature through implementation of natural and vegetative materials.

Aesthetics Working Group Meeting #3 – March 29, 2016

Develop up to three draft aesthetic concepts

The design team presented the AWG with three draft aesthetic concepts, each focused on one of the three separate themes of connectivity, nature, and art. AWG members worked in hands-on activities to refine each theme. The primary feedback provided was that the AWG preferred that all concepts include aspects of connectivity, nature, and art.

Other key points resulting from AWG Meeting #3 included:

- Distinguishing different segments of the corridor is preferred as well as creating generous pathways on east/west bridge crossings
- Lighting standards are important and shadow patterns on walls and columns could be utilized to create interest
- Providing shared use pathways for pedestrian users wherever possible should be a priority
- Preferring see-through bridge railing
- Preferring stainless steel/galvanized metal for fencing
- Providing irrigation and maintenance as a concern
- Identifying locations to preserve the opportunity for art along the corridor
- Using plant material to convey connectivity at east/west crossings using vegetation on bridges and tightly placed trees, where feasible

At the conclusion of AWG Meeting #3, workgroup members requested the design team to prepare three aesthetic concepts (based on what had been discussed and to include aspects of connectivity, nature, and art) to be presented and refined at the next AWG meeting. TxDOT staff concurred and directed the team to do so.

Aesthetics Working Group Meeting #4 – June 1, 2016

Update/develop up to three aesthetic concepts

The design team presented the AWG with three new draft aesthetic concepts, based upon input received at AWG Meeting #3. Concept 1 was based on a Texas Capitol theme. Concept 2 was based on a modern, geometric look. Concept 3 was based upon I-35 as a geologic transition between Blackland Prairie and Texas Hill Country. AWG members worked in hands-on activities to refine each theme. The most significant change during the meeting regarding the concepts was AWG input that Concept 3 celebrate only the Blackland Prairie identity instead of the geological divide between the two regions. The three resulting concepts follow.

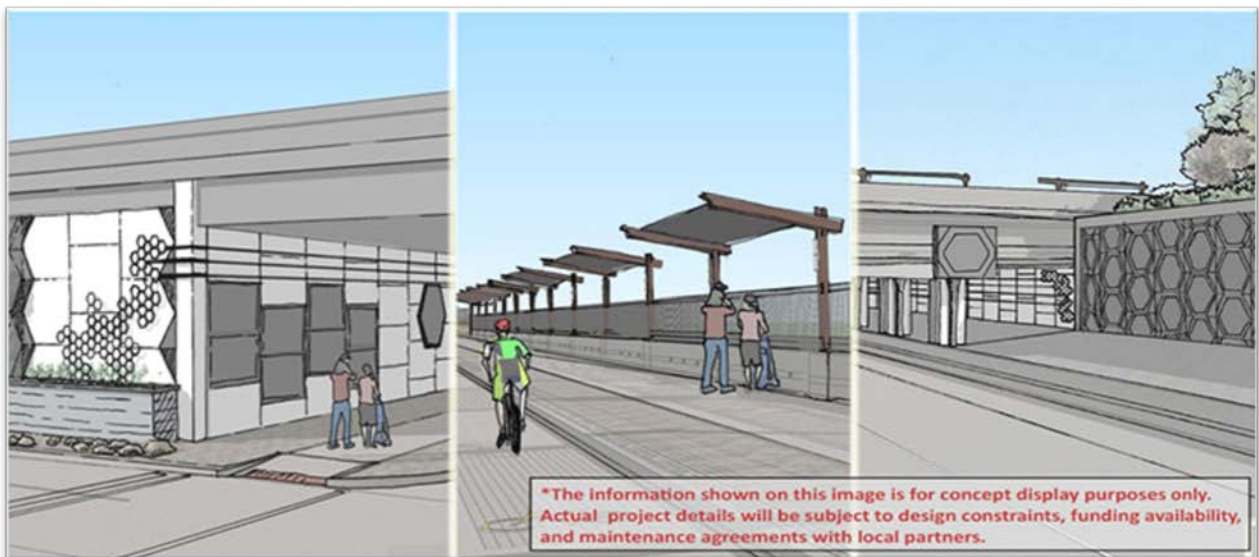
Concept 1

Concept 1 was influenced by themes found in and around the Texas Capitol building. These influences can be found throughout the design, including in the columns, railings, trellises, and walls. For example, concrete panels would resemble the Capitol building utilizing a similar color and texture. A unique column design inspired by adjacent influences such as Waller Creek and the Capitol building would be implemented. The railing on the east-west crossings would resemble the fence on the Capitol grounds.



Concept 2

Concept 2 was a more modern and contemporary look. It would include geometrically patterned wall panels that repeat throughout the corridor and linear lighting/conduit and “frames” mounted to underpass walls that would allow for art installations. Removal panels would also allow for future art installations at certain locations. A unique, modern column design would be utilized throughout the corridor. On east/west crossings over the I-35 mainlanes, trellises with ornamental lighting and possibly vegetation (vines) would line the road.



Concept 3

Concept 3 mimicked nature found around the Austin area, including the rolling hills of the Blackland Prairie. Repeating panels with raised concrete lines mimicking prairie grasses and hills would be placed at east/west cross streets under the I-35 mainlanes. Trellis/arbor structures would provide vertical vegetation in spatially constrained environments, where

feasible. Ornamental panels with integrated lighting and ornamental trees in tree wells would line the east/west crossings over the I-35 mainlanes.



The AWG asked to see the three concepts again before proceeding to the public vote originally planned between AWG Meeting #3 and AWG Meeting #4. Meetings were held with TxDOT and the General Engineering Contractor following AWG Meeting #3 to address AWG and TxDOT comments. Later, the three concepts were presented in AWG #4 for AWG approval and for further refinement.

Other input on the remaining three concepts included:

- Vegetation is strongly preferred
- Cross street naming should be done mindfully
- Additional investigation is requested regarding bike lane separation on elevated east/west cross street bridges
- Obstructions in shared use pathways should be avoided (i.e. lights, planters, trellises)
- Trellises should be incorporated into railing where feasible, but not for the bridge crossings through the decks which have adequate shade

Following AWG #4, a second online survey was held.

Online Survey #2 – July 14, 2016 to August 9, 2016

There were 2,658 participants that completed Online Survey #2. Instead of the travelling survey conducted previously with relatively low responses, in order to get the word out, flyers in both English and Spanish were posted or left at twenty locations near the I-35 corridor including local libraries, recreation centers, college campuses, and coffee shops in late July. A link to the survey was also posted in local newspapers, TxDOT's Mobility35 monthly newsletter, on local news websites and was broadcast on several local news stations.

After reviewing renderings and details of the three aesthetic concepts, participants were asked to rank them from favorite to least favorite. In total, 2,575 respondents answered Question 1; 83 skipped the question. The majority (60% of respondents or 1,522 votes) chose Concept 1, the Capitol theme, as their first choice. Concepts 2 and 3 each received 20% of the vote for the top pick.

Participants were also asked to choose up to three elements in which they feel aesthetic upgrades are most important. Respondents selected lighting (1,826 votes or 70% of respondents), landscape plantings (1,414 votes or 54% of respondents), and concrete wall panels (965 votes or 37% of respondents) as the top three. In total, 2,616 respondents answered Question 2; 42 skipped the question. Visual elements such as lighting, landscape, retaining walls, railings, and hardscape that are constructed in the future along I-35 through the Capital Area will incorporate themes from the winning concept (Concept 1).

Aesthetics Working Group Meeting #5 – August 10, 2016

Refine preferred concept

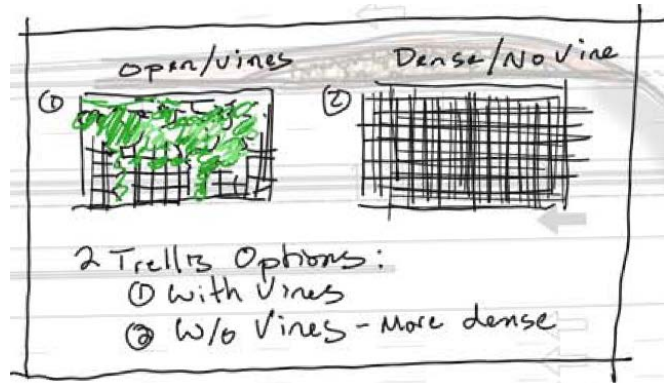
The design team summarized the survey results and goals for the final AWG meeting. Several members of the AWG revisited their concern that aesthetic elements are historically treated as a separate entity from the technical and structural design process of the freeway under TxDOT's standard process. This led them to revisit their wish to involve a commissioned artist early in the design process. TxDOT staff briefly reviewed the aesthetic guidelines process covered in the first AWG meeting which describes the role of aesthetics in freeway projects as the “skin” of the fundamental facilities that for decades have carried thousands of vehicles and tons of freight on a daily basis. This discussion concluded with the realization that changing the fundamentals of aesthetic implementation is a bigger issue than any particular project and should likely be decided at the FHWA/TxDOT statewide level.

The AWG then had a substantive discussion to refine Concept 1 (the Capitol theme concept) while keeping its inherent design which had been voted on. To facilitate this discussion, the team brought forth four example areas along the project corridor for the group to evaluate in further detail: St. Johns Avenue (a near-term project that has a constrained east/west crossing over the mainlanes), Woodland Avenue (a near-term project that has an east/west crossing under the mainlanes), Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (a long-term project that has an east/west crossing over-the-mainlanes with a large amount of right-of-way), and the I-35 Decks (which would heavily emphasize retaining walls and guardrails). The discussion highlighted the following aesthetic elements:

- Lighting, the number one choice that the survey participants voted as the element where aesthetic upgrades are most important, was discussed in depth. The AWG members recognized that lighting fixtures were not visible in the renderings shown in the survey, and that lighting was likely their highest priority because of visibility and safety concerns. The AWG would like cross street bridge lighting to be integrated into the trellis structure instead of within a separate fixture that is attached to the trellis

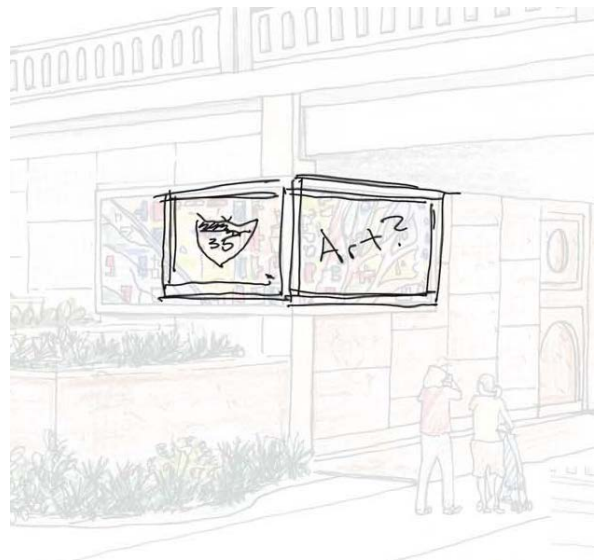
or a bridge rail. The AWG specifically noted they were less interested in the fixtures than what is being lighted for safety or design purposes.

- Trellises were discussed, namely because the AWG set them as a priority design element during their first meeting, primarily due to the shade they can offer pedestrians. They were a lower-scoring element in the public survey. Trellises can have a large aesthetic influence on east/west pedestrian



crossings. If trellis structures do not have vines or climbing vegetation, the spacing of the trellis weaving for the overhead segment should be more dense to provide shade to pedestrians. If vines are planted on the trellis structures, the weaving can be more spacious.

- As shown in the renderings of the winning concept, artwork at I-35 overpass bridge abutments were examined by the AWG. There were concerns about the location of the art since it may be too far away from pedestrians and east/west traffic. There was also concern about constraining artwork to the designated panels, and that TxDOT would not want the art to become a distraction to drivers. An AWG member mentioned that art, by definition, should be distracting. TxDOT conveyed that the art does not necessarily have to be constrained to the panels shown in the renderings. If local entities and the artist(s) sponsored by others can be identified early, flexibility can be accommodated during design development. During this discussion, one member mentioned that they would prioritize wayfinding and signage for these areas rather than art, and perhaps the art could be moved to areas underneath bridges for the pedestrian to have a better experience. As a result, the corners of the bridge abutments could be utilized for wayfinding, signage, and the I-35 logo.



- The AWG discussed the variety of physical conditions that occur along the I-35 corridor. For example, at Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. near the University of Texas, pavers should be added adjacent to concrete sidewalks (where possible) to account for the large amount of pedestrian traffic in the area. Pavers were a lower-scoring element in the public survey.

- The AWG members agreed that landscaping is a priority, even in areas where the available space is highly constrained.
- During AWG Meeting #5, the TxDOT staff reminded the AWG that in addition to physical constraints, cost will continue to be a consideration for implementation in future I-35 projects. Cost is one of the constraints that is inherent to implementing large scale transportation projects. Therefore, it is important that the design team also know the AWG's order of priorities of aesthetic treatments as projects are developed. Online Survey #2 was TxDOT's first indication of where the public would like to see aesthetic treatments occur; however, some AWG members were concerned that perhaps the public did not consider cost when completing the survey. The project team reminded the AWG that a disclaimer was printed on each of the concept renderings mentioning that project details are subject to funding availability. In addition, the project team also identified that for each transportation project, there is a general percentage of the overall project funding that is allocated for aesthetic improvements. One member of the AWG felt it was important that recommendations not be used to leverage additional funding from the city of Austin. Another member felt the opposite and explained that local funding for aesthetic treatments which improve I-35's integration with the surrounding community are worth leveraging, if necessary, for certain elements.
- Connectivity and wayfinding has been the top concern of the AWG since their first meeting and therefore was one of the refinements that the AWG discussed at length during AWG Meeting #5. Regarding the drivers on the I-35 mainlanes, wayfinding should be implemented into the east/west overpass bridge beams to display cross street names using a form liner method. A preferred font style was debated, and the preference for sans serif font styles resulted. When presented with the option to incorporate the city of Austin's Downtown Austin wayfinding font for vehicular signage, they were agreeable to the recommendation. Additionally, the AWG does not want a "frame" shown around the street names as shown in the conceptual renderings.
- Regarding wayfinding at the street level, street names should be displayed at pedestrian eye level in bold lettering running at a 90-degree angle up the side of bridge columns. In addition, the I-35 shield should be added on the other corner of



the bridge column. These same elements could be added to the corner bridge abutments instead of art as discussed previously.

AWG Meeting #5 concluded with TxDOT staff thanking the AWG members for their service to the public, a message that was reiterated in a final e-mail sent to all participants.