

To: Design Workshop and PARD Zilker Park Vision Plan Team
From: Zilker Neighborhood Parks and Environment Team (including members from Barton Hills NA, Bouldin Creek NA, Sierra Club and Save Our Springs)
Date: January 28, 2022
Re: "Zilker Park Collective" Comments on Interactive Map (Jan. 7, 2022)

The purpose of this letter is to offer a thoughtful response to the letter from "Zilker Park Collective" referenced above and attached below. We appreciate the letter for its generic support of environmental concepts but are astonished at how much of their letter over-focuses on parking issues that are in direct conflict with maximizing nature-based elements of the plan. Thus, we are compelled to provide an alternative perspective for your consideration.

Our understanding is the goal of the Zilker Metropolitan Park Vision Plan is to develop a visionary framework to guide the restoration and future development of the park for decades to come. We hope the ZPVP will look 50 years into the future. Instead, it appears the Collective is prioritizing commercial event needs. Worse, it is embracing the 1950s car-centric culture when the population of Austin was 250,000. The Zilker Park Collective is advocating for significant new construction in or near the park (parking lots, parking structures, large visitor center).

For these reason, we must ask: ***will this plan be innovative and truly visionary?*** Or will it be an exercise in furthering commercial interests over the needs of every-day park users? **During the age of intensifying urgency due to climate change, does Austin have the luxury of once again putting commercial needs over nature and the physical health/mental health benefits it brings?**

As you know we have advanced the idea of "rewilding" additional acres of the park and to challenging the commercial interests to "green up" and decarbonize their operations. We refer to the [City of Austin Climate and Equity Plan](#) and to the [Live Nation decarbonization plan](#) as examples of the kind of forward thinking plans that are already available.

The rewilding plan suggests returning more of the park to nature thereby enhancing park use for more visitors, increasing shade and decreasing the heat

island effect, diversifying wildlife habitat, protecting riparian areas and increasing climate mitigation.

We ask the following broad questions:

1. Will the plan envision a park that provides a healthy reprieve for individuals, families, runners, swimmers, soccer players, small groups picnicking, organized and informal sports, and dog-owners? Or will the park primarily serve as a commercial event space, albeit one nicely framed by nature, centrally-located, and with a great view of downtown? Will the plan become a debate about preserving parking or about what a great nature-based park would mean for the next generation?
2. We do not believe the Great Lawn is presently actually great OR is even a lawn anymore. Will it be enhanced by providing more shade and remain accessible for daily use a greater number of days of the year? Or will access to the Great Lawn and other parts of the park remain off-limits during the most weather-friendly days of the year and continue to serve as a parking lot instead of the unique and beautiful riparian natural area it could be?
3. We believe that every activity now available in Zilker Park could continue in even more enjoyable ways if the plan for Zilker Park was based on nature and rewilding - not parking. There is of course a minor role for parking but should it be the primary foundational core of the plan?
4. Will the planning process compare the true financial and climate costs of more cars, more construction and more impervious cover? Or will the plan be driven by the near-term business needs of event planners and concessionaires and by the need for parking revenue?
5. Will the plan lead to a park enhanced by restoration and rewilding that is a carbon sink in a rapidly warming world? Or will new parking lots and structures induce demand for driving more cars with more carbon emissions? Is it a “parking plan” we need? Or an innovative “park access and transportation plan”?

6. Will the plan support the multi-faceted alternative transportation that the 21st century demands? Or will the City continue to support reduced parking and alternative transportation elsewhere, but abandon that policy in our iconic parkland?
7. Will planners refute the underlying myth that access to the park by family groups and those with mobility challenges can only be achieved by driving a car to the park? Or will the plan include forward-thinking recommendations that welcome families and previously excluded communities and address special needs individuals with a range of options, outreach, equity-based promotions (e.g., free bus and shuttle passes), and more culturally diverse programming?
8. Will the plan support low-impact, on-site education with dispersed kiosks immediately adjacent to the referenced sites, rather than a large, separate visitor center that leads to more impervious cover and more carbon emissions?

In addition to these fundamental questions, we have attached detailed comments to the Letter referenced above.

We are asking for a truly collaborative plan for Zilker Park, not a vapid rehash of the status quo.

As neighborhood and environmental leaders, we are offering an aspirational vision that relies more on the role of nature than on the role of parking. Thank you in advance for taking these points into consideration.

Zilker NA Parks and Environment Team with members representing:

Barton Hills NA

Bouldin Creek NA

Save Our Springs Alliance

Sierra Club

ATTACHMENT 1: Detailed ZNA Parks Team Responses to January 7th Letter from Zilker Park Collective

Under Introductory Paragraph	
1. “parking access is a top priority”	Parking access is not a requirement for access to the park. ACL, for example, brings in 10s of thousands with little parking.
2. “Adequate parking (in addition to improvements for other transportation modes) will ensure that visitors from all over Austin feel included and welcome.”	Parking is neither necessary nor sufficient for welcoming those who have felt excluded in the past. More creative strategies, for example, targeted outreach, equity-based access (e.g., free bus passes), and more culturally diverse programming are needed.
3. “ a significant portion of the overall number of unpaved parking spaces that may be removed from the park are first replaced elsewhere in the park and/or immediately adjacent to the park”	The current illegal use of the Polo Fields and the Butler Landfill must not be replaced by paving over and legalizing parking elsewhere in the park.
Under “We generally support...”	
Bullet #3: “Retaining the Great Lawn as a lawn (some ecological uplift without removing the opportunities for the current uses of the space).”	This area is highly degraded and off-limits for many months of the year. “Some ecological uplift” will not change this.
Bullet #4: “Converting the Polo Field to additional lawn space or sports fields IF alternative parking is found.”	The Polo Field parking must be removed AND ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORTATION MUST BE IMPLEMENTED.
Bullet #7: “One or more visitor hubs and gateways throughout the park. (This idea is an extension of the “education and welcome center” priority.)”	Low-impact, on-site education using dispersed kiosks immediately adjacent to the referenced sites will provide better educational opportunities than a centralized location.
Under “We oppose the following”	
Bullet #2: “Reducing the existing lawn areas, which are some of the most heavily utilized areas in the park.”	More trees do not equal less usage of open spaces. More shade trees will enhance most uses by individuals, small gatherings, and organized and informal sports.
Bullet #3: “...vehicular traffic thorough ANSC.	Many areas in the park, not just in ANSC, are

ANSC is an educational space within a sensitive riparian zone that is meant to be pedestrian only.”	“sensitive riparian zones” and need to be enhanced and protected.
Under “We believe the following is missing”	
Bullet #1: “The “visitor hub” design concept...to educate visitors”	Dispersed kiosks that describe the site directly in front of the user will better serve educational purposes.
Bullet #3: “...additional restroom on the south side...as recommended in the 2009 Barton Springs Master Plan.”	A restroom is needed on the south side, but not a major bath-house structure.
Under “Parking”section	
“In keeping with the 2019 Zilker Park Working Group findings, we generally support a parking strategy in which a significant portion of the overall number of unpaved parking spaces that may be removed from the park are first replaced elsewhere in the park and/or immediately adjacent to the park.”	In fact the ZPWG did not reach consensus on many issues and conflicting findings can be found in the final report. For example, the WG recommended that parking on the Polo Fields be phased out so that “by May 1, 2022 after securing an equivalent number of viable, preferably offsite parking alternatives to the reduced parking that will accommodate the displaced parking and that are similar to the displaced parking in affordability, convenience, and usability.” (Zilker Park Working Group, June 2019, p.13).
Under “In-Park Parking and the Polo Field”	
...”parking solutions be evaluated both financially and environmentally”	Planners should estimate the dollar cost and carbon balance for each design option prior to February Community Meeting #4 . Side by side financial and carbon-emission comparisons are needed for Austinites to realistically evaluate these various design options: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Construction of new surface parking, 2. Construction of parking structures (@\$25,000/space), 3. Use of Existing offsite structures and lots (some City-owned) with a frequent, electric-powered

	.circulator.
“we recommend restricting Polo Fields parking uses to specific calendar dates or events...until such time as the Zilker parking plan is funded and implemented.”	A parking plan is not what is needed. A park access and transportation plan is. Nor should closing the Polo Field to parking be dependent on prior replacement parking.
Under “Park-Adjacent Offsite-Parking”	
“...privately owned offsite parking be viewed as a supplemental option rather than a primary long-term parking solution.”	Off-site parking, both private and City-owned, should be a fundamental, NOT supplemental, part of the park’s access plan.

ATTACHMENT 2: REFERENCED LETTER FROM “Zilker Park Collective”

Date: January 7, 2022

To: Claire Hempel, Design Workshop

Zilker Park Collective Comments on Interactive Map

In October, our organizations sent a letter (included below) which details our top priorities for the Zilker Vision Plan. Based on our review of the latest Zilker Interactive Map and the design alternatives presented at the Community Meeting #3, we are providing additional feedback on the design alternatives. With the Zilker Park organizations supporting this letter, parking access is a top priority that must be balanced with the objectives of prioritizing the natural environment at Zilker Park. Adequate parking (in addition to improvements for other transportation modes) will ensure that visitors from all over Austin feel included and welcome. We support a parking strategy in which a significant portion of the overall number of unpaved parking spaces that may be removed from the park are first replaced elsewhere in the park and/or immediately adjacent to the park. Additional details for parking-related feedback is set forth below in the “Parking” section.

We generally support the following:

- Balancing restoration and maintenance and enhancement of the natural environment with sustainable solutions for increased park visitation and parking needs.
- Efforts to protect water quality and ecological uplift opportunities, especially along waterways such as the banks of Barton Creek and Lady Bird Lake.
- Retaining the Great Lawn as a lawn (some ecological uplift without removing the opportunities for the current uses of the space).
- Converting the Polo Field to additional lawn space or sports fields IF alternative parking is found.
- Ecological uplift in the Nature Preserve Zone shown on the Interactive Map, which includes the Zilker Clubhouse and the Austin Nature and Science Center.
- Ecological uplift of landfill and Polo Field areas, either as mowed lawn area or natural area IF the parking spaces here are replicated somewhere nearby.
- One or more visitor hubs and gateways throughout the park. (This idea is an extension of the “education and welcome center” priority.)

We oppose the following:

- Any reference to repurposing the Girl Scout Cabin in any way that would reduce access by the historic and current users, the Girl Scouts of Central Texas.
- Reducing existing lawn areas, which are some of the most heavily utilized areas of the park.
- Introducing vehicular traffic through the Austin Nature and Science Center (ANSC). ANSC is an educational space within a sensitive riparian zone that is meant to be pedestrian-only. One proposed route bisects the birds of prey exhibits and cuts off Overlook Point from the rest of ANSC.

We believe the following is missing:

- The “visitor hub” design concept should be described as opportunities to integrate interpretive spaces and programming to educate visitors about the environment, culture, and history of Zilker Park and surrounding watershed areas.
- A plan for an upgraded playground near Barton Springs Pool that serves an interpretive purpose, and additional play features for children throughout the park.
- A design concept for the addition of a rest room on the south side of Barton Springs Pool, as recommended in the [2009 Barton Springs Master Plan](#).
- Active transportation paths (not just gateways), as described in Survey #4. Our letter states: “We support an improved pedestrian and bicycle trail system through the park that brings those that walk, bike, or roll from one destination to another through the park, as well as associated wayfinding signage.”
- Circulator options, including exploring the Zilker Eagle, as described in Survey #4. Our letter states: “We support prioritizing internal circulation of people within the park from parking, transit, or their point of entry to their destinations. We hope the consultant team will explore the possibility of an expansion of the Zilker Eagle train serving this purpose.”
- If realignment of the primary entry for ANSC is considered, school buses must have clear and easy access to the front of ANSC, and pedestrian safety must be a priority between parking and bus drop-off locations.

Parking:

In keeping with the 2019 Zilker Working Group findings, we generally support a parking strategy in which a significant portion of the overall number of unpaved parking spaces that may be removed from the park are first replaced elsewhere in the park and/or immediately adjacent to the park. This group also supports a multi-faceted parking strategy that differentiates user groups and provides a mix of parking options for weekday users, weekend users, special events, and large special events.

The Interactive Map concepts focus primarily on (1) consolidating existing lots within the park and removing parking from the Polo Field, (2) creating a parking garage under MoPac or parking on Barton Springs Road, and (3) exploring park-adjacent parking options outside of Zilker. Following below is our feedback on these strategies, along with additional recommendations.

In-Park Parking and Polo Field

As noted in the design concepts for the Polo Fields, “in recent years, City Council has directed the Parks and Recreation Department to remove parking from the Polo Field area.” To support this directive, we recommend a phased removal of Polo Field parking in the near term by reducing Polo Field overflow parking by thirds over the next four to six years, provided that convenient, affordable and accessible parking is funded and implemented to replace a significant number of the parking spaces removed. We recommend a social media education campaign to describe the benefits of these changes.

In addition, we recommend restricting Polo Fields parking uses to specific calendar dates or events (namely, Blues on the Green, Zilker Hillside Theater, Zilker Tree Lighting, Trail of Lights, Zilker Kite Festival, Zilker Botanical Garden Spring Event, Austin YMBL Sunshine Camps events), provided that event organizers are required to make reasonable remediation/repair measures (e.g., turf replacement, aeration, etc.) until such time as the Zilker parking plan is funded and implemented.

To meet the requirement of providing long-term convenient, affordable and accessible replacement parking spaces for the Polo Field, we recommend that the following “in park” parking solutions be evaluated for financial and environmental feasibility:

- Structured parking underneath MoPac
- An underground parking structure with a “green” roof in any suitable location (near MoPac at the Polo Field, Pistol Range, or Butler Landfill areas),
- Parking improvements at Azie Morton along the south side of Barton Springs Pool (to reduce impervious cover and improve water quality while meeting parking needs)
- Parking improvements to the Stratford/Butler Landfill area and Lou Neff Road, using landfill remediation and “green” landscaping to improve them ecologically and aesthetically
- An option for buried/structured/green roof parking along Barton Springs road on the west side of the park to help offload parking in unpaved areas of the park.
- Options for additional structured parking or lot(s) in or near the east end of the park closest to Lamar or along the south side of Barton Springs Road near MoPac.
- While we appreciate the idea of consolidating some of the small lots, we would also like to see scenarios for retaining some or all of the small lots on the north side of the Barton Springs Zone, using “green” landscaping to improve them ecologically and aesthetically. These lots provide reliable, easy access to popular amenities such as Zilker Rowing, the playground, Hillside Theater, and Barton Springs Pool.

Park-Adjacent Offsite Parking

To provide additional transportation options for park visitors, we agree with the idea of exploring “shared parking” opportunities with entities that own or operate parking structures near Zilker Park, such as Dougherty Arts Center or Barton Oaks Plaza Garage. These should connect with park circulators to get people where they need to go.

However, until negotiations occur, we recommend that privately owned offsite parking be viewed as a **supplemental** option rather than a primary long-term parking solution for Zilker Park. Privately owned garages are not a revenue source for the City, may be operated by third parties, and may be sold or redeveloped at any time. It is unknown whether parking costs would be controlled to ensure continuous affordable parking. Questions of maintenance and security would also need to be explored.

We appreciate your consideration of these issues and look forward to further discussion.

Sincerely,

ABC Kite Festival
Austin Parks Foundation
Austin YMBL Sunshine Camps
Barton Springs Conservancy
Explore Austin
Friends of the Austin Nature and
Science Center
Friends of Barton Springs Pool
Girl Scouts Zilker Cabin

Hill Country Conservancy
The Rowing Dock
The Trail Foundation
Trail of Lights Foundation
Umlauf Sculpture Museum & Garden
Waterloo Disc Golf
Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy
Zilker Park Boat Rentals
Zilker Theatre Productions