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Council weighs 'walkable' projects for city

Programs would tweak development rules to make certain locales less reliant on cars

By Dylan McGuinness
STAFF WRITER

After more than three years of study, the city is poised to adopt new regulations aimed at fostering more "walkable" neighborhoods, easing Houston's overwhelming

reliance on automobiles and directing more residents toward a growing transit system.

City council is set to vote Wednesday on a slate of ordinances that would bring buildings closer to the street, force parking lots to the side or behind buildings, ex-

pand sidewalks, and require "buffer" zones between sidewalks and the road. The ordinances would apply to new buildings and redevelopment only in certain parts of the city.

The ordinances would create two distinct programs: areas with a "Walkable Places" designation, where the city seeks to foster pedestrian-friendly development; and areas in the "Transit-Oriented

Development" Program, where the city hopes to bring the same principles to most streets that fall within a half-mile of a bus or train station.

Mayor Sylvester Turner called the plan an effort to modernize Houston and move away from the city's automobile-oriented planning of the 1990s. Failing to do so, he said, would stifle the city's growth.

"I am a strong believer that we cannot design a city for yesterday," Turner said. "If we do that, we have failed."

While the underlying regulations are similar, the "Walkable Places" program initially will take shape in three pilot projects, including Emancipation Avenue, Midtown, and Hogan and Lorraine Streets in the Near North-
Walkable continues on A17

Building toward greener urban spaces



Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

Carolyn White, conservation director at Memorial Park Conservancy, walks atop the mound that will be used for the project.

By Molly Glentzer
STAFF WRITER

Houston's growing reputation as one of America's leading "green" cities will gain more traction this week, when fences go up to begin work on the much-anticipated land bridge across Memorial Drive.

The sexiest element of the Memorial Park master plan adopted by City Council in

Construction begins on 'special' Memorial Park land bridge, set to be finished in late 2022

2015, the land bridge is one of several projects that were fast-tracked in 2018 with a \$70 million lead gift from the Kinder Foundation. Officials expect the construction to be complete by late 2022.

Reconnecting the park's long-severed north and south

sides with a double mound of green space, the land bridge is designed to improve safety for humans and wildlife, enhance storm water management and restore native coastal prairie. Aside from those benefits, it also could provide Houston with a dramatic, de-

fining landmark that makes the city itself seem more whole: From its crest, viewers will be able to see both the urban skylines of downtown to the east and Uptown to the west.

"It has so many positives," said philanthropist and pipeline titan Rich Kinder. "Iconic is an overused word, but it's really going to be a special place. It's amazing the view
Land bridge continues on A16

As Biden shifts left, oil donors contribute to Trump

Hardened stance on climate by Democratic nominee widens rift

By James Osborne
STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON — With former Vice President Joe Biden leading most polls to be the next president of the United States, oil lobbyists have been careful to focus on their common ground with the Democratic nominee.

Behind the scenes, however, oil executives are writing checks to President Donald Trump with greater zeal than they did four years ago, as Biden campaigns on a climate plan that seeks to eliminate carbon emissions by mid-century.

The oil and gas sector has given Trump \$935,000 in campaign donations as of July 21, more than three times what they have given Biden, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a think tank that tracks corporate contributions and lobbying. That is a sharp shift from four years ago when Trump collected \$1.2 million in donations from the industry, only \$200,000 — or 17 percent — more than Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

As the incumbent, Trump might seem a surer bet for companies than he was as a political outsider four years ago. At the same time, Biden's recent climate stance is very different from Clinton's, who as secretary of state had promoted the U.S. fracking industry overseas — Biden has sworn off donations from the oil and gas sector, though through loopholes executives are still giving.

"The Democrats are further left on energy issues now than they were in 2016," said Matt Mackowiak, a Republican consultant in Austin. "Biden left to his own devices is probably more moderate on these issues, but the party is not going to let him do that. He's under a lot of pressure from the left."

And Trump is playing directly to oil executives' fears about the Democrats increasing activism on climate change.

During an appearance last week at an oil drilling operation in Midland owned by one of his do-
Oil continues on A17

Massive blasts rock Beirut, killing dozens

WIRE SERVICES

BEIRUT — At least two massive explosions shook Beirut on Tuesday, injuring and killing hundreds of people, strewing devastation across multiple neighborhoods and shattering windows for miles around.

The cause of the early-evening blasts was not immediately clear, but senior officials said it appeared that flammable materials stored in a warehouse had

caught fire. An earlier, smaller explosion had apparently ignited a fire, then came two secondary blasts, propelling a vast cloud of pink and yellow smoke over the city.

The casualty toll rose through the evening. Health Minister Hassan Hamad said the preliminary toll was more than 70 dead and more than 3,000 wounded.

Hospitals were overwhelmed by the number of injuries. One,
Lebanon continues on A17



AFP via Getty Images

Ammonium nitrate was cited as a possible factor in the huge explosions that killed more than 70 in the Lebanese capital.

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FROM THE COVER



Renderings courtesy Nelson Byrd Woltz

A rendering shows the land bridge that will be built across Memorial Drive near the western edge of Memorial Park, reconnecting the park's north and south sides.

LAND BRIDGE

From page A1

you get when you go up 50 feet.” While the land bridge will create 25 acres of green space somewhat out of thin air over six lanes of roadway, the project also encompasses 45 existing acres on the park's south side that will expand the trail system through a restored native coastal prairie habitat. Ball fields and a parking lot that occupied the area for decades have been moved to the park's northeast corner, where Phase I of a new sports complex is essentially complete.

Memorial Park Conservancy project director Randy Odinet said the initial work will occur on the south side of Memorial Drive. Traffic will be reduced from three lanes to two in each direction while a new section of Memorial Drive and the land bridge's tunnel arch structures are built just to the south.

The commuter trail on the south side of Memorial Drive will be temporarily diverted around the construction zone. A bit of the Seymour Lieberman Exer-Trail on the road's north side will transition next March into a new path with a curb and new lighting, farther back from the roadway. “In the meantime, people using the trails will see fences but not major work,” Odinet said.

Natural blueprint

The arch structures for the two tunnels will be built at the same grade as the existing road. Made of pre-cast concrete in 6-foot sections, each tunnel has sloping wings that form a kind of chute. Counting those wings, one tunnel measures 560 feet; the other is 400 feet long.

The park's existing topography drove the bridge's design. A small creek – one of five natural drainage features within the park – will run underneath its center. The real challenge was

calculating the weight of the soils that will cover the structures. “Normally you build a tunnel into a hill; not the hill, then the hill,” said Dennis Wittry, a senior principal with Walter P. Moore, the project's lead structural engineer.

The foundation system was paramount, he added, because while each concrete panel will weigh just under 50,000 pounds, the soil on top will add another 300,000 pounds.

Part of larger trend

That soil won't be trucked in. Much of it is already mounded nearby, from the excavation of Hines Lake in the Eastern Glades. It will be inoculated through the park's bio-cycle program with a living biological agent brewed from felled trees and brush. Richer, local soil absorbs storm water better and makes trees and plants stronger.

Lead landscape designer Thomas Woltz calls the land bridge and prairie restoration an audacious “belt buckle” of the master plan. Less than 1 percent of historic Gulf Coast prairie habitat remains today, making it one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America. Serving as a “green sponge” during heavy rains, prairie also provides food and shelter for diverse flora and fauna, including migrating birds and insects. Those benefits will increase over time, as plants mature.

“Establishing a prairie is the opposite of putting down sod in your yard and watering it until it takes,” Woltz said. “First, the soil has to be built ... and it will take at least three to five years with continuous weeding for the ecosystem to come into its own. It might feel like a long time, but in terms of reestablishing an ancient ecology that's going to last for generations, it's the blink of an eye.”

Houston is not the first city to have such a structure, but its



Memorial Park's land bridge is designed for active recreation, with a steplike “scramble” to the top alongside fully accessible pathways.

land bridge is the first that aims to restore a major urban park in America, and it will be the largest.

Land bridges are part of a larger trend to make places more porous and improve connectivity, said Charles Birnbaum, president and CEO of the Cultural Landscape Foundation based in Washington, D.C. He knows of about 200 so-called “cap” projects around the globe, either already built or planned, that extend parks across freeways.

Seattle built the first land bridge, Lawrence Halprin's sculptural-looking Freeway Park, in 1976. Dallas built the first in Texas, Klyde Warren Park, across its Woodall Rogers Freeway. Birnbaum compares Houston's land bridge to the 13-acre “tunnel top” structure under construction at San Francisco's Presidio Parklands.

Memorial Park Conservancy president and CEO Shellye Arnold said restoring prairie made sense near the land bridge because remnants of original native prairie and wetlands still exist

near there, along the railroad track that bisects the park's east and west sides.

Some people still think of the park as a more dense forest, although drought decimated 60 percent of its tree canopy in 2011. The master plan to reset its historical ecology encompasses several decades of work, and it won't all be prairie, Arnold noted. “Some areas are designated riparian, pine hardwoods or wetlands/savanna.”

‘Better quality of life’

More trails will come, too, including hike-and-bike connectors underneath Loop 610 and a north-south-trail to Richmond Avenue adjacent to the railway line.

“Park projects are important to the future of Houston's economy,” Uptown Houston president John Breeding said. “And one of the best things you can do for business is create a better quality of life.”

During the next three years, all of the Uptown TIRZ's capital improvement funds will be ded-

icated to Memorial Park's infrastructure – primarily the land bridge. “We're all in,” Breeding said.

The TIRZ previously spent more than \$30 million on the road and parking infrastructure for the recently opened Eastern Glades, and will likely spend at least another \$30 million during the coming decade. Uptown and other organizations also are seeking federal funds to build commuter connector trails. The land bridge is a key piece, important for improving pedestrian and biker safety, Breeding said.

The plan for the land bridge is what sold Rich Kinder and his wife, Nancy, on funding the 10-year plan to fast-track Memorial Park projects. They wanted to see the transformation during their lifetime but also to improve the park for their grandchildren's generation. “We are not unique,” Nancy Kinder said. “It's all about Houstonians doing what they can to make this a better city.”

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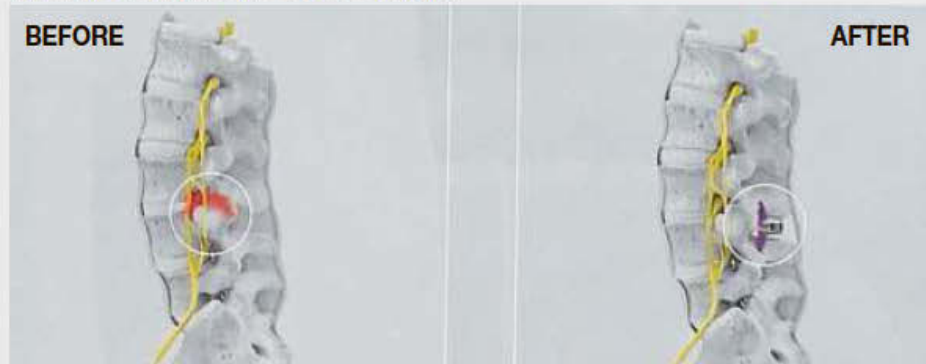


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