

# Keeping Austin Moving

Austin has earned a reputation as one of America's most vibrant and livable cities. The region's transportation leaders are striving to keep this extraordinary momentum through creative, multimodal solutions.

By Mike Heiligenstein  
& Randy Clarke

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In recent years Austin, Texas, has become a fixture on lists of the best places to live in America – and for good reason. The population has grown to more than two million today. It has a winning combination of economic opportunity, natural beauty and rich cultural assets. The city is home to a top university, music festivals and entertainment events. Underpinning a highly attractive lifestyle are strong economic fundamentals: a robust labor market, a string of high-tech investments and unemployment rates that are among the lowest in the country.

Therefore, the region has witnessed a rapid expansion of residential and commercial development – forming roughly concentric circles – that stretches ever-farther away from the city itself. The city is adding residential capacity at a quick pace, but it is far less significant than the construction that's going on in the burgeoning suburbs.

With this expansive growth comes the challenge of mobility and the realization that roadway expansion alone will not be an effective and efficient solution to move

people and goods. This is why the region is relying heavily on a two-pronged strategy: to provide people with highway options, including tolled roads, that help them spend less time in traffic and more time living their lives; and developing a more robust transit system that is more far-reaching and responsive to the people who live within the city and out into the suburbs.

## Driving Innovation

Efficiently using the transportation funds available requires us to be creative and responsive to community needs. Both the Mobility Authority and Capital Metro, the two organizations we lead, share perspectives on how best to fund the assets that can provide congestion relief and set the stage for the region's doubling of population in the coming two decades.

We work very closely with members of the Texas legislature, encouraging them to keep transportation funding high on their priorities list. Right now, we do not have nearly enough funding from the state to support a comprehensive response to the region's current mobility challenges, let alone those coming in the future.

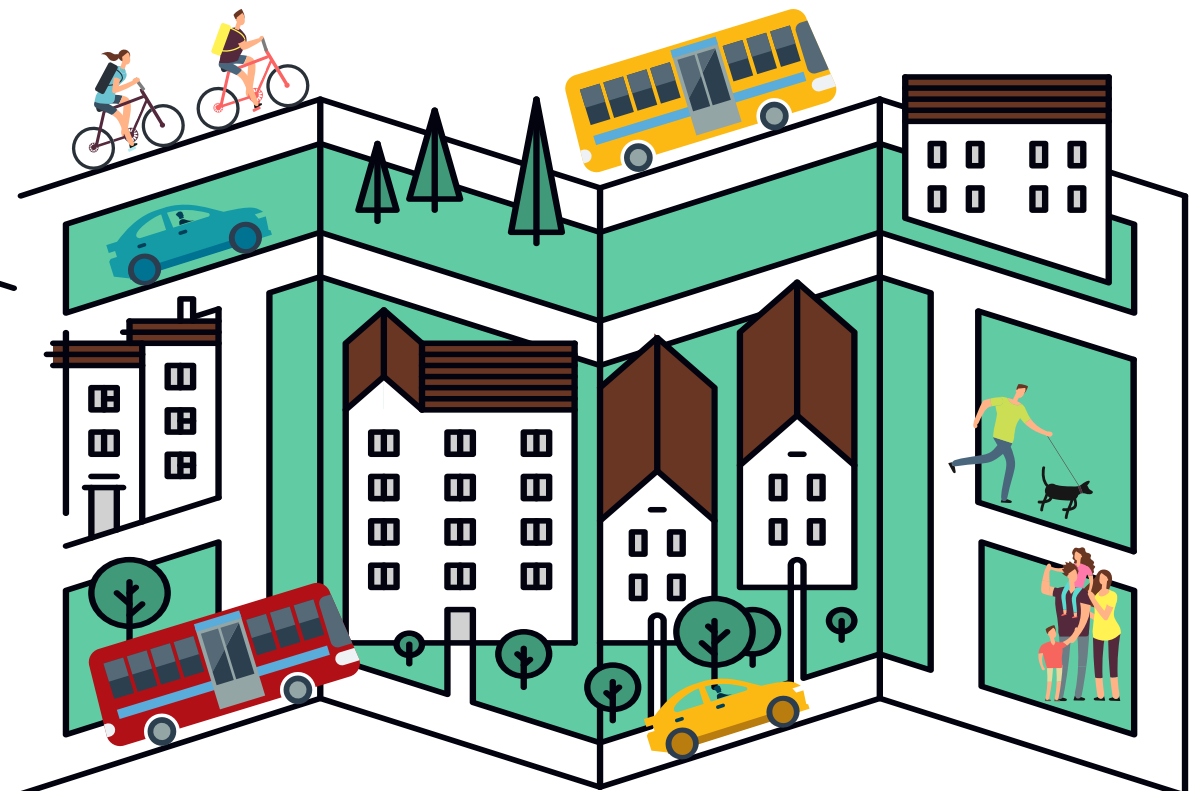
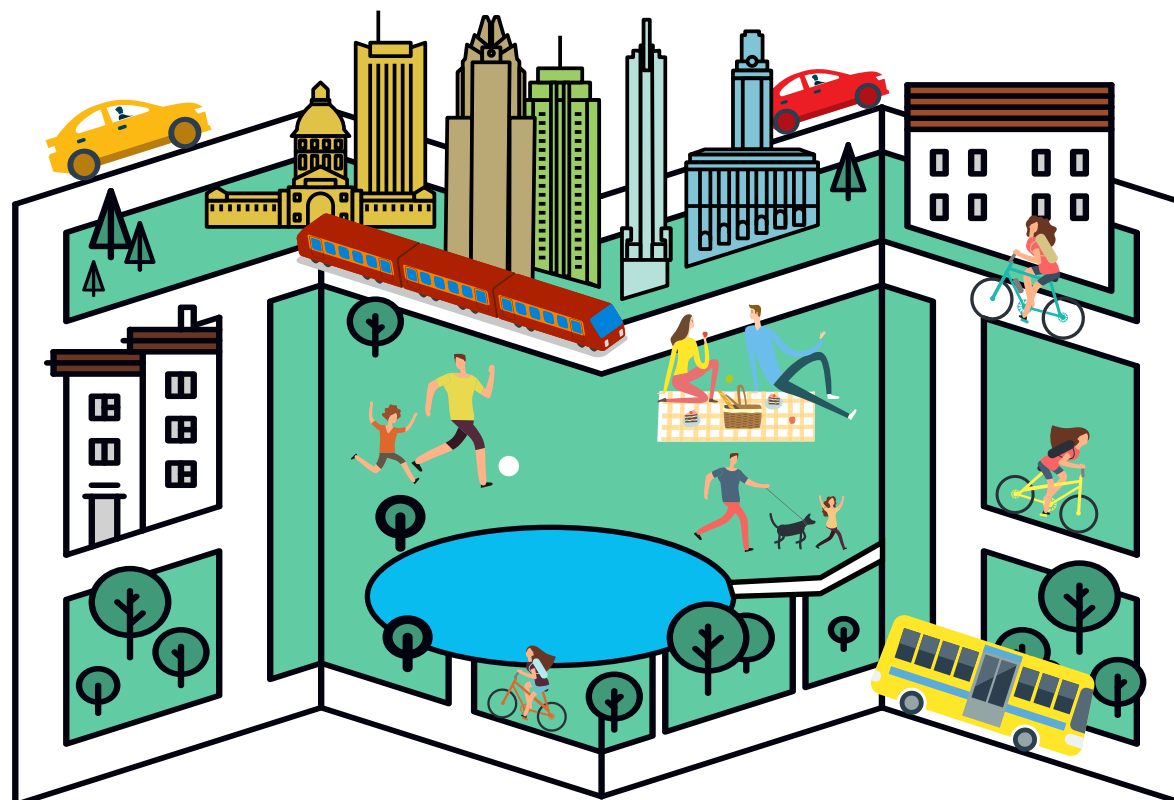
Federal funding, too, has its limits. Texas is a "donor state," sending more gas-tax dollars to Washington than it gets back every year.

Thus, we need to augment both federal and state funding through alternative financing options that can expand mobility options, whether that involves roads or transit assets.

## Tolls Are Vital Tools

Since the launch of the Mobility Authority in 2005, tolls and user fees have offered an alternative to the reliance on government funding to ensure that we're able to make critical improvements to our transportation system. The agency started with no assets or revenue that year and has since built \$2 billion in assets, with \$1.5 billion in pipeline projects. All toll revenue from roads the Mobility Authority operates is reinvested in regional transportation, both to maintain these facilities and fund future expansion. Currently, the Authority has four toll roads in operation:

- 183A Toll, an 11.6-mile toll road northwest of Austin, was our first project. Phases 1 and 2 were completed in 2007 and 2012, respectively, and Phase 3 is in the proposal stage.
- 290 Toll, a 6.2-mile toll road east of Austin, saw completion of Phases 1 and 2 in 2012 and 2014, respectively; Phase 3 is scheduled to open in 2020.



- 71 Toll Lane, a 4-mile limited-access toll road southeast of Austin, near the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, opened in 2017.
- MoPac Express Lane, an 11-mile stretch of variably priced toll lanes through the heart of Austin, opened in 2017; we also have launched an environmental study for an extension, MoPac South.

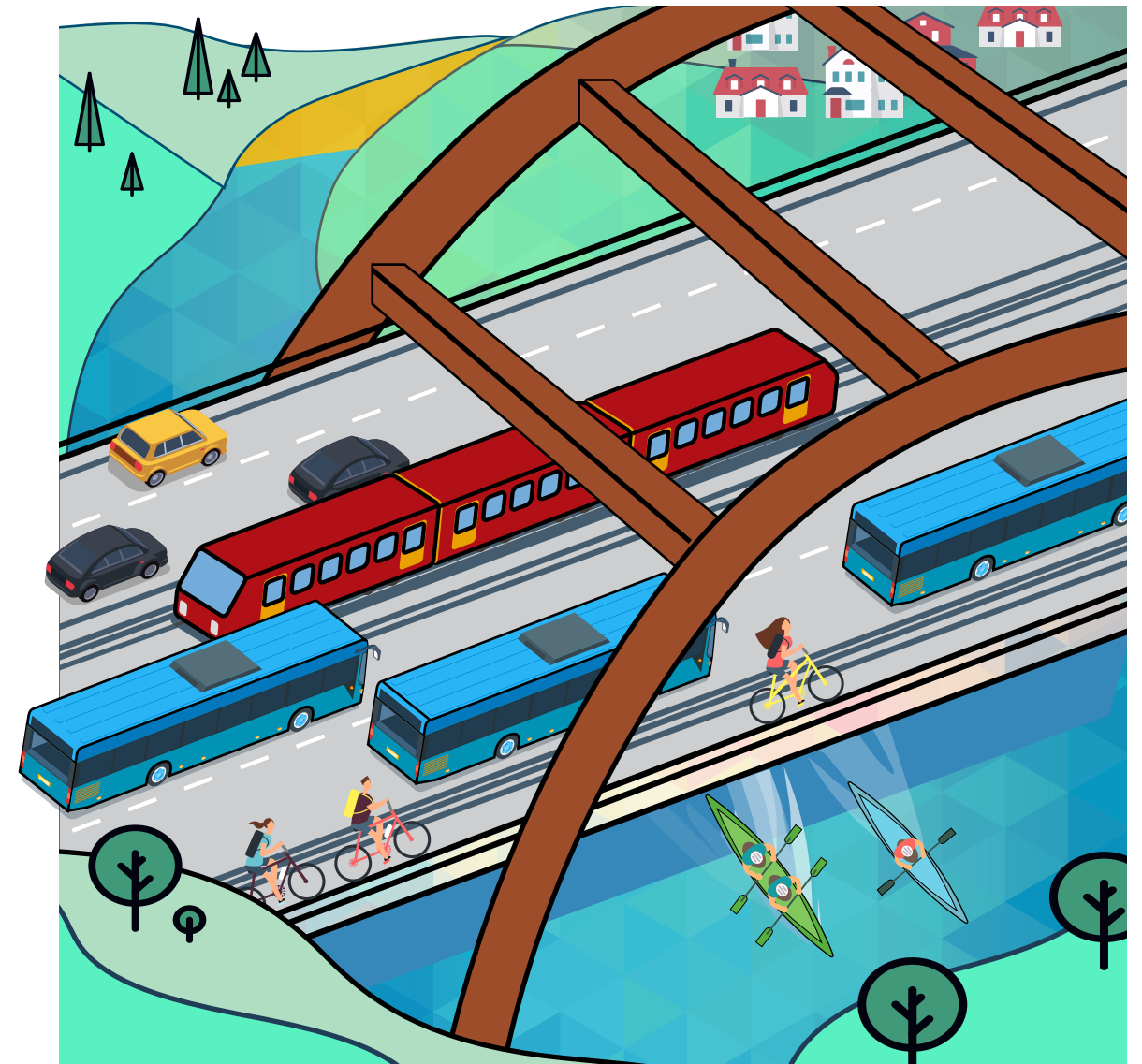
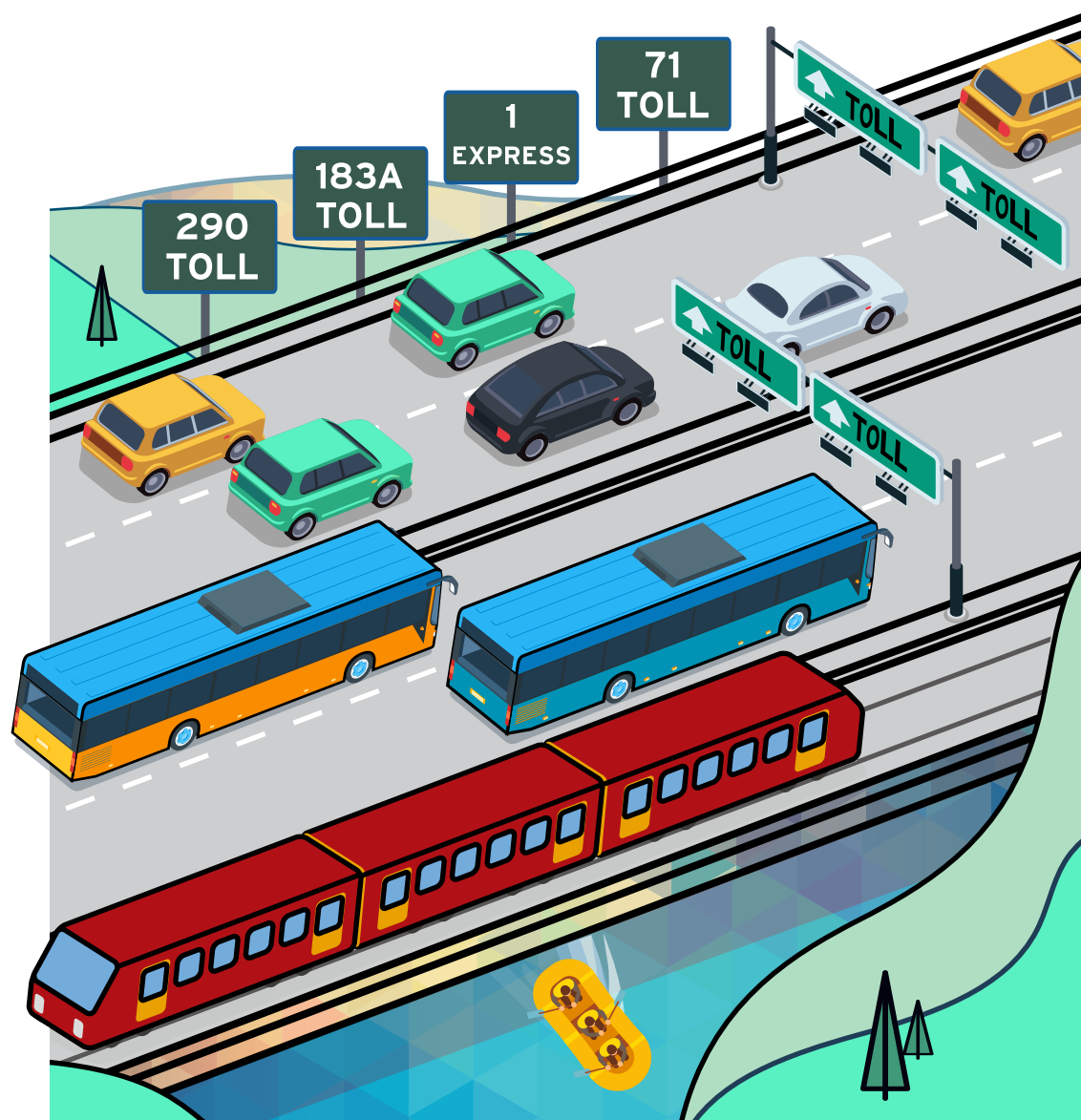
The MoPac Express Lane is the first-of-its-kind congestion management tool in Central Texas, providing an essential option for drivers traveling along one of Austin's busiest routes, either to reach downtown or points beyond. MoPac is used by many as an alternative to Interstate 35, which runs through the heart of Austin. Right now, MoPac carries more than 180,000 cars and trucks each day, a number expected to rise to more than 220,000 per day by 2035.

As a whole, the Mobility Authority's toll roads register between 9 and 10 million transactions a month, with the MoPac Express Lanes accounting for about 1 million of those. As part of every road project, we also invest in expanding or improving non-tolled lanes, and whenever feasible we construct multimodal, pedestrian and bike-friendly shared-use paths.

Of note, we place great emphasis on environmental factors, and take advantage of the experience of experts from around the nation. We're currently building a new toll road, SH 45 SW, that will include a number of redundancies that will make it the cleanest road in all of Texas.

#### Greater Emphasis on Transit

Capital Metro, Austin's regional public transportation provider, is working to expand its network of transit options, which includes



improvements to its existing system as well as a plan for a high-capacity transit system for the future. Each day the leaders at Cap Metro ask two questions: How can we make public transportation more responsive today? And, how will we build a system that can move more people tomorrow without adding more vehicles to our roads?

Formed in 1985, Cap Metro, has relied primarily on its robust bus system to provide transit service to people in the region. Cap Metro operates 14 high-frequency bus routes, with more than 350 buses and more than 50 MetroRapid buses (for a modified version of Bus Rapid Transit on the city's busiest arterial corridors). This strategy has been highly successful: the system has about 30 million boardings every year and serves travelers not only in the urban center but also deep into the suburbs.

However, we know that with Austin's growth trajectory we must significantly increase access to high-capacity transit options, which can move more people, more efficiently. Currently, Cap Metro operates one commuter rail line, the Red Line, which connects downtown Austin to the northwest suburbs. This 32-mile facility is very popular, and the city is pleased to be breaking ground on a new terminal in downtown Austin, which will offer an improved experience for our riders.

This single line, however, represents only the first of several dedicated transit lines we hope to put into service in the coming years. While other fast-growing U.S. cities are investing millions (or billions) in public transportation, Austin hasn't yet made that same commitment. In 2014, we brought a rail bond proposal to the ballot box but were not able to garner enough votes to pass it.

Capital Metro’s high-capacity transit plan, Project Connect, has the potential to build a transportation system for a more connected, 21st-century city. In addition to creating new transit services that serve communities from the downtown area to the outlying suburbs, Cap Metro seeks to invest in next-generation technologies, such as a 100 percent electric bus fleet, and efficiency enhancements, such as dedicated lanes, signal privileges and queue jumping.

Cap Metro currently is in the process of soliciting ideas from a range of stakeholders – hosting formal meetings as well as speaking with transit users on the street and in the neighborhoods – to build a proposal that can meet Austin’s needs. Our intent is to have this transit initiative on the ballot in November 2020. Community engagement throughout the region is a big part of this effort. In particular, we must forge partnerships with neighborhood associations and suburban community groups to demonstrate the benefits of transit.

In the meantime, Cap Metro is strategically investing to improve the experience for users every day. The agency made a \$10 million investment in high-frequency routes, and we have dramatically improved our bus stops. We also are striving to broaden our value to the community, including a program that provides free transit use to primary and secondary school students.

Recently, the Mobility Authority began a creative partnership with Cap Metro by giving the transit agency’s buses free access to its tolling facilities. It’s a win-win proposition: road congestion is alleviated by boosting transit use on heavily used commuter routes, and commuters can enjoy an improved experience (such as onboard Wi-Fi) and lower costs as they travel to and from work.

Since the partnership began, Cap Metro ridership has increased by more than 50 percent year over year on the MoPac Express Lanes alone.

**Looking Forward**

As we prepare for the future, we are factoring in the effects of the technological revolution taking place in our industry, such as the rise of big data analysis, the advent of autonomous vehicles and the transition

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Going forward, our two agencies will work together to unlock additional synergies. For example, by sharing data more effectively, we can provide the public with up-to-the minute information about their commutes and other travel plans. At the same time, we can gain a deeper understanding of how people are using our transportation assets, what gaps exist and how we can fine-tune or augment our existing services to provide even greater value.

to mobility as a service in the decades ahead. Some trends, such as with the proliferation of scooters throughout Central Austin, are arising so quickly that we’re forced to adapt on the fly.

We want to ensure that our facilities are “future ready” for advanced technologies and emerging modes of transportation. However, it’s important that we aren’t investing in the latest “shiny object” to the detriment of long-term, sustainable systems. So, as we invest, we are asking ourselves these questions:

- Does this new technology have the potential to reduce congestion?
- Will it make our system more efficient?

- How quickly will the public accept the new technology?
- Will it improve public safety or introduce entirely new risks?
- Can it help us reduce environmental impact, such as by cutting carbon emissions?

Better transportation infrastructure strengthens the fabric of society. It connects people, provides access to jobs and vital services, and ideally it can make life a little less stressful while preserving more time to spend with loved ones.

At the core of our joint efforts – and of all the political and community leaders here – is to keep Austin thriving while preserving the quality of life that’s kept us on the shortlists of best places to learn, live, work, play and raise a family. ■

**About the Author**

Mike Heiligenstein is the Executive Director of the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, a multimodal transportation agency. Mike has served the Mobility Authority since 2003, overseeing its growth from a startup transportation agency to a nationally recognized leader in toll road operations. During his 30 years as a public official, first as a Round Rock City Council Member and later as a Williamson County Commissioner, Mike has focused on advancing a wide range of vital infrastructure projects. His national leadership roles include current service on the boards of the Texas Transportation Institute and the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association. Mike is a graduate of the University of Texas with degrees in government, a master’s of government and a Master of Business Administration.

**About the Author**

Randy Clarke has been the President and CEO of Capital Metro, Austin’s public transportation agency, since March 2018. For the previous two years, he served as vice president of operations and member services at the American Public Transportation Association in Washington, D.C. Prior to that, he spent seven years in various positions with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority in Boston, including deputy chief operating officer. Randy was a key member of the senior leadership team at the MBTA, which provides 1.2 million trips daily. He is a graduate of Acadia University in Nova Scotia and holds a master's degree in public policy from the University of Southern Maine.