

Loop 360 Improvement Study Frequently Asked Questions



What is the purpose of the Loop 360 Improvement Study?

The purpose of this study is to involve stakeholders throughout the community in identifying safety and mobility problems along the Loop 360 corridor and recommend potential improvements. Ideas and feedback gathered from stakeholders will guide the development of short-term solutions, as well as a long-term vision for the corridor.

How does this study differ from previous Loop 360 efforts?

Previous efforts to improve Loop 360, including a 2004 proposal to add tolled grade-separated lanes and a 2011 proposal to implement innovative intersections, were not well-received by the community. Although some intersection improvements resulted from these efforts, most of the transportation issues at which they were aimed remain largely unaddressed, and continue to increase.

The Texas Department of Transportation initiated the current improvement study as a fresh start to addressing the ongoing transportation issues along and across Loop 360. Lessons learned from previous efforts have led to a different approach that actively engages the public throughout the planning process. The study is not a continuation of previous efforts. It is a community-driven effort to identify problems and develop options to address them in both the short and long term.

Why are improvements needed?

Loop 360 provides primary access to far west Austin, acting as a thoroughfare for residents and as a commuter route for those living and working along the highway and those passing through. It provides access to a major Lake Austin boat ramp as well as Travis County greenbelts. This scenic highway is also a popular recreational bike route. The section from RM 2244 to US 290/SH 71 is currently ranked as the 76th most congested road in Texas, while the section from US 183 to RM 2222 is ranked #94.

Traffic conditions along Loop 360 vary a great deal throughout the day, with congestion increasing significantly during peak travel periods, such as morning and afternoon "rush hours." The same two sections of Loop 360 from US 183 to RM 2222 and from RM 2244 to US 290/SH 71 currently rank 35th and 36th, respectively, out of 100 for their Texas Congestion Index (TCI) ratings. The TCI is a measure that describes how much longer a trip takes during peak periods vs. off-peak (or free-flow) traffic periods. Currently, it takes over 50 percent longer to travel on Loop 360 during peak periods than during free-flow conditions.

Who are the Loop 360 stakeholders?

Loop 360 stakeholders include, but are not limited to all residents, neighborhood groups, businesses, commuters, bicyclists, and pedestrians who travel on or across Loop 360 or have origins/destinations within the Loop 360 corridor.

Who will benefit from the study?

Ultimately, we hope that all residents, pedestrians, bicyclists, businesses, commuters, and others who use and rely on Loop 360 will perceive a benefit. The goal of the study is to work with stakeholders to identify potential solutions that optimize safety and mobility while balancing local accessibility and corridor-wide mobility, bike/pedestrian/transit use, environmental impacts, affordability, and other important issues for all Loop 360 users. Specific benefits for each user group will depend on the solutions that are recommended for further development.

Will the study consider pedestrian, bicycle and transit needs?

Yes. The study will consider a wide range of transportation modes. The degree to which alternative modes are incorporated into proposed solutions will depend largely on the initial needs identified through stakeholder input and technical analysis. TxDOT is coordinating with representatives from the bicycling community, Capital Metro, and local neighborhoods to identify these needs and opportunities for alternative mode improvements within the corridor.

What is the study timeline?

The stakeholder-focused study began in October 2014 and was initially estimated to take 12-15 months. However, the timeline has been extended to allow for additional technical and public input into the four-step process:

1. **Identify** – Engage stakeholders in identifying problems and defining goals for improvements
2. **Evaluate** – Form stakeholder working groups to evaluate potential solutions
3. **Refine** – Refine potential solutions, disseminate them to stakeholders, and solicit feedback
4. **Present** – Present study results and identify next steps

Stakeholders will be involved throughout each step of the study and are encouraged to provide input at any time. The study is estimated to be complete by fall 2016.

What types of improvements will be considered in the study?

Based on traffic count data collected from December 2014 - February 2015 and initial modeling results, as well as public input gathered through stakeholder meetings and the online survey, the Loop 360 study team has identified nine improvement "scenarios" to be analyzed in the study. A scenario simply stipulates a certain set of improvements to assess their effectiveness in handling 2040 projected traffic. The nine scenarios being analyzed in the study cover a broad range of potential operational and capacity improvements, each with their own potential benefits, limitations, and impacts. The Loop 360 Improvement Study scenarios include the following:

1. **No Build (Do Nothing):** This scenario serves as the benchmark against which all other scenarios are compared. It looks at what would happen if no improvements are made, other than those that are already included in the regional transportation plan for 2040.
2. **Intersection Improvements:** This scenario assumes that major intersections throughout the corridor would be "optimized" to handle as much traffic as possible. It includes signal timing, turn lanes, intersection design changes, and other improvements that the transportation model shows to be most effective at each intersection. This scenario does not take into account potential public support for or opposition to the technically "optimal" improvements. Such feedback would be gathered through discussions with local neighborhoods and other public input opportunities during the next phase of project development, and would most likely change the specific types of improvements that are ultimately recommended for each intersection. Therefore the improvements approved for implementation would likely be less than technically optimal and would not perform as well.
3. **Add Two Lanes, Keep Existing Traffic Signals:** This scenario would maintain the existing at-grade signalized intersections and add one lane in each direction. ("At-grade" improvements are those where Loop 360 and the cross-streets are at the same level, thus requiring a traffic signal to control the flow and turning movements). This scenario would also include all intersection improvements evaluated in Scenario 2.
4. **Grade-Separate Existing Four Lanes:** This scenario would remove the traffic signals from Loop 360 mainlanes between US 183 and South MoPac. Major¹ intersecting streets would be accessible via ramps to/from the mainlanes, grade-separated by building overpasses/underpasses. Traffic signals would likely remain at existing locations to control intersecting traffic. Access modifications would be made at minor intersections to improve safety and reduce wait times to access Loop 360 where overpasses/underpasses are not feasible or cost-effective. Existing signalized connections at US 183 and South MoPac, as well as the signals along the city street portion known as the "Capital of Texas Highway" from US 183 to North MoPac, would remain as they are today. These signals are necessary in Scenario 4 to help control the flow of traffic entering and exiting the Loop 360 corridor. Improving these major highway intersections with flyovers without adding additional lanes to Loop 360 would quickly flood the corridor with "induced" traffic and overwhelm the four mainlanes and grade-separated intersections.
- 4C. **Grade-Separate Existing Four Lanes, Add Flyovers and Improved Connections:** This scenario would include all improvements outlined in Scenario 4. It would also improve connections and add flyovers to connect the following:
 - Southbound US 183 to southbound Loop 360
 - Northbound Loop 360 to northbound US 183
 - Southbound Loop 360 to southbound South MoPac

¹ *For purposes of analysis, "major" intersections were identified as the "worst" intersections along the corridor for modeling purposes only based on existing and projected traffic conditions. Additional intersections may be considered for overpasses/underpasses in future, more detailed environmental and design studies. Any such additions would increase the overall project costs, but would not significantly impact travel times and levels of service within the corridor.

- Northbound South MoPac to northbound Loop 360
- Northbound Loop 360 to northbound South MoPac

This scenario is primarily intended to show the anticipated mobility impacts (primarily in the form of induced demand) of removing the most congested signals at US 183 and South MoPac, which would otherwise serve as a means to control the flow of traffic entering and exiting the corridor.

5. **Grade-Separate Existing Four Lanes, Add Flyovers and Improved Connections, Add Two Grade-Separated, Non-Tolled Lanes:** This scenario would include all improvements outlined in Scenario 4, improve connections, and add flyovers to connect the following:

- Southbound US 183 to southbound Loop 360
- Northbound Loop 360 to northbound US 183
- Southbound Loop 360 to southbound South MoPac
- Northbound South MoPac to northbound Loop 360
- Northbound Loop 360 to northbound South MoPac

This scenario would also add one grade-separated, non-tolled lane in each direction to help carry the additional traffic anticipated due to induced demand.

- 5M. **Grade-Separate Existing Four Lanes, Add Flyovers and Improved Connections, Add Two Grade-Separated Managed (Variably Tolled/HOV/Transit) Lanes:** This scenario would include all improvements outlined in Scenario 4 and add one grade-separated, managed lane in each direction. The new lanes would be variably tolled (meaning the price for single occupancy vehicles would fluctuate based on demand) to provide a reasonable guaranteed speed for users and improve emergency response access and transit viability. This scenario would also improve connections and add flyovers to connect the following:

- Southbound US 183 proposed express lanes to southbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes
- Northbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes to northbound US 183 proposed express lanes
- Southbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes to southbound South MoPac proposed express lanes
- Northbound South MoPac proposed express lanes to northbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes
- Northbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes to northbound South MoPac proposed express lanes

6. **Maintain Existing Four Lanes, Add Four Grade-Separated, Non-Tolled Lanes, Add Flyovers and Improved Connections:** This scenario would maintain the four existing at-grade non-tolled signalized lanes. These lanes would serve as “local” access lanes for neighborhoods, businesses, schools, etc., along the corridor. This scenario would also add two grade-separated, non-tolled lanes in each direction to serve as through-lanes for longer trips, and would include improved connections and additional flyovers to connect the following:

- Southbound US 183 to southbound Loop 360
- Northbound Loop 360 to northbound US 183
- Southbound Loop 360 to southbound South MoPac
- Northbound South MoPac to northbound Loop 360
- Northbound Loop 360 to northbound South MoPac

- 6M. **Maintain Existing Four Lanes, Add Four Grade-Separated Managed (Variably Tolled/HOV/Transit Lanes), Add Flyovers and Improved Connections:** This scenario would maintain the four existing at-grade non-tolled signalized lanes. These lanes would serve as “local” access lanes for neighborhoods, businesses, schools, etc., along the corridor. This scenario would also add two grade-separated, managed lanes in each direction to serve as through-lanes for longer trips. The new lanes would be variably tolled (meaning the price for single occupancy vehicles would fluctuate based on demand) to provide a reasonable guaranteed speed for users and improve emergency response access and transit viability. This scenario would also improve connections and add flyovers to connect the following:

- Southbound US 183 proposed express lanes to southbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes
- Northbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes to northbound US 183 proposed express lanes
- Southbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes to southbound South MoPac proposed express lanes
- Northbound South MoPac proposed express lanes to northbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes
- Northbound Loop 360 proposed managed lanes to northbound South MoPac proposed express lanes

These scenarios are for comparison purposes only and may not necessarily be what is ultimately recommended. Any combination of the above or other treatments might be required to meet geographic challenges or phasing required by funding constraints.

Why can't we just improve the synchronization of the traffic lights along the corridor?

Improving traffic signal synchronization will help, but not solve the congestion problems on Loop 360. Currently, the corridor's traffic signals are manually configured and do not "talk" to each other. Therefore, any timing tweaks must be made on-site to each individual signal, and any tweaks to one signal do not affect any other signals along the corridor. The study team is currently working to identify potential signal upgrades and timing improvements, which could provide some relief in light to moderate traffic conditions. However, such improvements would have little to no effect during peak traffic times unless they are accompanied by more significant design and/or capacity improvements – there is simply too much traffic trying to move through each intersection to avoid "queueing" at the signals. All "Build" scenarios considered in the Loop 360 Improvement Study, including intersection and additional capacity improvements, will assume that traffic signals will be upgraded and synchronized to the greatest extent possible.

What about the possibility of implementing mass transit, including passenger rail, within the corridor?

Due to the relatively low development densities and unique geological/environmental characteristics along Loop 360, the current possibilities for mass transit within the corridor are fairly limited. However, services such as bus rapid transit could be viable under certain "Build" scenarios being considered for the corridor. For instance, Scenarios 5M and 6M would add new managed (variably tolled/HOV/transit) lanes and would guarantee a minimum speed of travel for those who use the additional lanes. Single occupancy vehicles would pay a toll to use these lanes, while transit and carpool riders, as well as emergency vehicles, could use them for free. This would make riding the bus a more attractive option for Loop 360 users who would otherwise either have to pay a toll or continue to drive through the existing traffic signals.

How will TxDOT ensure that the beauty of Loop 360 is maintained?

We have heard a clear message that the community wants to maintain the beauty and character of Loop 360, regardless of which improvements are ultimately identified for the corridor. The study team has identified this as a specific evaluation criteria, and will consider this important factor in its analysis of all scenarios, including the "No Build" (Do Nothing) scenario. We will report potential visual impacts associated with each scenario as part of this improvement study. Aesthetics will continue to be an important factor as Loop 360 improvements move through the project development process, and will be evaluated in great detail during Phase 3 environmental/design studies.

How will the scenarios be evaluated?

Each of the scenarios will be modeled, analyzed and compared based on the following criteria:

- **Local Mobility** – How well does each scenario address congestion (travel times, level of service, travel speeds, etc.) *within* the corridor, including at local intersections?
- **Regional Mobility** – How well does each scenario address congestion on connecting/parallel facilities and/or reduce cut-through traffic on these facilities by accommodating more traffic on the Loop 360 mainlanes?
- **Safety** – How will each scenario address safety issues for cars, bicyclists and pedestrians? Are some scenarios safer than others?
- **Cost** – How much will each scenario cost and how will it be funded?
- **Feasibility** – How easily can each scenario be funded and constructed, and how long will they take to complete?
- **Aesthetics/Visual Impacts** – How will each scenario impact the appearance and "feel" of Loop 360?
- **Environmental Impacts** – How will each scenario impact water quality and resources, drainage, wildlife and endangered/threatened species habitats, parks and greenspace, historical/cultural resources, noise, air quality, etc.?
- **Longevity** – How far into the future will each scenario effectively handle mobility needs along the corridor?
- **Transit/Emergency Access** – How well does each scenario accommodate emergency response needs and make transit a viable alternative transportation option?

What will the outcome of the study be?

The study will use the results of the scenario analysis to identify and gauge the support for short-term improvements to enhance safety and mobility while maintaining viable access to neighborhoods and properties along the Loop 360 corridor. It will also define a vision for feasible long-term improvements for the corridor. The study will complete the first phase (conceptual planning) of the overall project development process, and is an important step towards making Loop 360 improvements a reality.

How will selected improvements be financed?

No funding has been identified for improvements at this time. Completion of the improvement study is a necessary step towards defining solutions and securing funding, as it will help define the scope and estimated costs of proposed improvements. Technical data and public input on the costs and benefits of various improvement options will be incorporated into the study's results.

How is stakeholder input being incorporated into the study, and how can I get involved?

Stakeholder involvement not only helps identify the problems experienced by Loop 360 users, but helps shape the solutions and potential visual, economic, environmental, and community impacts. Input received to date has helped the study team evaluate and refine the originally proposed scenarios, identify new scenarios to be studied, and refine the criteria by which all scenarios will be evaluated. Ongoing stakeholder involvement is necessary to support and promote solutions for the corridor.

Throughout the process there will continue to be opportunities to provide feedback, concerns and ideas to project staff. Comments are welcome at any time, and may be submitted through the online comment form or mailed to: Bruce Byron, Project Manager, 360/620 Corridor Improvement Studies; Texas Department of Transportation - Austin District; P.O. Box 15426; Austin, TX 78761-5426. All questions related to the Loop 360 Improvement Study may be directed to Bruce Byron at (512) 832-7107.

TxDOT will also meet with stakeholder groups located in six corridor sections, in addition to other interested stakeholders throughout the greater Austin area, to discuss both local and corridor-wide issues. Visit www.loop360study.com for more information and study updates, or to submit comments, request a meeting with the Loop 360 study team, and/or sign up for the mailing list to receive updates on important study milestones and public input opportunities.

