

## WHY I SUPPORT THE MONTROSE BOULEVARD PROJECT

*Guy Hagstette is an urban designer, resident of MAMA, and long-time supporter of Trees for Houston, and this represents his personal and professional opinion about the balancing act between preserving or planting new street trees after overseeing miles of streetscape projects in downtown Houston.*

A recent Museum Area Municipal Association (MAMA) newsletter included an article encouraging us to sign a petition because “the Montrose TIRZ<sup>1</sup> plans to cut down most of the majestic trees that line Montrose Boulevard” (see last page for a copy). I have been following this project since it began, and I know this statement is simply not true. I don’t doubt the sincerity of those opposed to the project, but I am compelled to respond to this short but very misleading statement. A word of caution - facts tie to details, and details matter, so I can’t fit my response supporting the project in a newsletter banner.

The project is planned to eventually rebuild Montrose Boulevard from Buffalo Bayou on the north to US 59 on the south (Montrose in the MAMA area south of US-59 will not be affected). Only its Phase One from Buffalo Bayou to Clay Street (one long block south of West Dallas Street) is fully funded and ready to be implemented. Opponents criticize Phase One as far too expensive for “only two blocks,” but those two blocks are very long and cover a distance of over one-half mile. The vast majority of the project is not as far along and requires detailed engineering and funding. However, its preliminary engineering plans are public, and I have reviewed them.

The project is needed to address flooding in the Montrose area. Some are arguing better drainage is not needed - *less than seven years after the lessons learned from Hurricane Harvey*. And for those of us who actually live in this community, we know it only takes a heavy downpour for Montrose south of Westheimer to be impassable. This is why the project’s first phase ties to Buffalo Bayou – water flows downhill. It also is where the Ismaeli Center will open, and the roadway adjacent to that major cultural facility is very poorly designed. Finally, our drainage problem cannot be solved by making someone else’s worse, so the project’s storm sewers are over-sized to allow more water to drain from the streets but also detain it until peak floodwaters have passed. In urban areas of the city where large detention basins aren’t possible, this is a common strategy to help prepare Houston for the next big storm.

Most of us drive as well, and we know the roadway needs work. Ranging in age from over 50 to more than 100 years old, the roadway needs more than an asphalt overlay. Overlays help for a few years, but asphalt is not strong and is only as good as its underlying base. In our case, that aging base needs help, whether its half a century or more than a century old.

The age of the roadway varies so much because Montrose Boulevard is really two streets built 60 years apart from one another. Before about 1970, Montrose only extended from Main Street to Westheimer. It had been built as a true boulevard with a grass median and grand homes lining it. It is from an era when “multi-modality” was a given, not an aspiration, and it provided a gracious 17 feet of space for trees and pedestrians between the curb face and the right-of-way line and also allowed no overhead utilities. After residential deed restrictions lapsed and the street became a commercial thoroughfare, the grass median was removed to accommodate parking along the curb and left turn lanes.

Montrose north of Westheimer was cut through that area sixty years later by expanding the right-of-way of a local residential street. It is the product of an era when implementing the “Major Thoroughfare Plan” was paramount, and all the focus was on the automobile. No longer on a quiet residential street, many of the original homes were redeveloped as retail to serve passing autos, and overhead utilities were installed to serve those businesses. Trees and pedestrians were an after-thought, with only ten feet at most allocated between the curb face and the right-of-way line, enough for a very narrow sidewalk and a thin strip of grass. This is the root problem behind the tree controversy.

While drainage was and is the basis for the project, the Montrose TIRZ saw the project as an opportunity to address some of the street's other shortcomings, most in the 1970s-era segment north of Westheimer where sidewalks are narrow and trees are shoehorned into four foot strips behind the curb. Their strategy was and is (from north to south):

- Create a proper front door for the new Ismaeili Center, which will be a cultural landmark for our city, fix a poorly-designed roadway from Allen Parkway to West Dallas Street, and provide an outfall into Buffalo Bayou for the major new drainage system.
- South of West Dallas to Westheimer (Phase One covers one long block of this area), narrow the median but provide enough width to preserve its existing trees. The median is extra-wide because the 1970s plan was to eventually add a third traffic lane in each direction (the standard design of Houston's late-20<sup>th</sup> century major thoroughfares), which the Montrose TIRZ plan sets aside in favor of trees and sidewalks.
- The narrowed median will allow the roadways to be shifted toward the center to provide more room for trees and sidewalks on each side while still providing the same traffic capacity as today, albeit with the slightly narrower lanes that have become more common in recent years (the same as Kirby Drive through River Oaks). The end result will be closer to the more gracious space for trees and sidewalks found along the original section of Montrose south of Westheimer.
- South of Westheimer, there already is plenty of room for sidewalks and trees, and the big move will be restoring the historic grass median except where left turn lanes are needed.



*Phase One median trees planted in the center to avoid impacts if the 1970s plan to add a third lane in each direction was implemented. The roadways now will be shifted into the median about half of the originally planned distance.*



*This is in Phase One and typical of Montrose's sidewalk areas north of Westheimer. Most sidewalks are already on the right-of-way line and some are on private property. The narrowest sidewalk allowed by the city will still impact the existing trees because there is no extra room.*

### ***So what about the trees?***

- None of the “majestic” live oaks south of Westheimer will be removed.
- None of the live oaks of up to 20 inch trunk diameters found in the median north of Westheimer will be affected unless the city requires left turn lanes (there are 9 in Phase One). Opponents claim they will be harmed because the median will be narrowed. However, I believe in listening to experts, and when it comes to trees, that is Barry Ward from Trees for Houston. He has walked the area and stated the trees will be fine. The two rows of trees are near the center because the 1970s plan was to add a third lane in each direction by taking out most of the median. Today’s plan would take less of the median than anticipated when the trees were planted. However, some Eastern Redbuds will be lost near the West Dallas intersection and replaced by 200-gallon live oaks.
- The general challenge is the trees between the roadways and sidewalks north of Westheimer. Live oaks were planted decades ago in the +/-4 foot-wide grass strip between the curb and narrow sidewalk. In Phase One, they range from 4 to 12 inch trunk diameters. The crowns of those that have been able to grow a bit larger on the east side of the street are being cut gradually into a “V” shape to avoid damaging the overhead power lines. The Phase One area south of Dallas has twenty live oaks (13 on the east side of the street and 7 on the west).
- Phase One north of West Dallas Street to Allen Parkway includes a dozen small live oaks alongside the Ismaeli Center that will be removed to completely reconfigure this segment of roadway. On the west side of the street, there are three large trees that occupy the entire space between the curb and the cemetery’s wall, leaving little room for a sidewalk.
- In addition, the project includes 137 new trees in Phase One alone, including 200-gallon trees in the median and 100-gallon trees along the sidewalks (the biggest you can plant in that area).



*Trees along the sidewalk vary in size (4” to 12” trunks) and are smaller than the median trees.*



*A Phase One tree’s crown cut into a v-shape by Centerpoint. This will continue.*

Before adopting their current position, opponents of the project made the debate about trees versus people, meaning the existing trees and pedestrians. What got lost was the proposed plan will provide much more room for both trees and people because the curbs will move out about seven feet from their current alignment, providing more room for sidewalks and street trees. If you accept the expert opinion of the long-time leader of Trees for Houston, the trees in the median also will not be harmed. And just as a reminder, none of the trees south of Westheimer are in harm's way, and the project proposes to restore much of the historic grass median, which will allow people to cross Montrose more safely.

Opponents who want to save all the existing trees have now adopted a new position - better drainage in flood-prone Houston is not needed. They also propose a coat of asphalt can fix the roadway. Both of these claims are short-sighted. Houston needs to do the hard work of addressing flooding, crumbling roadways, and inadequate sidewalks, or we will pay daily when we drive, walk, roll or ride and in a big way when we flood, either in our frequent downpours or worse in another hurricane.

Opponents have adopted this position because they want all trees saved, but the existing trees will suffer anyway. Live oaks need room to grow, and a four foot grass strip is just not enough. This is why the trees along the sidewalk are so small compared to the trees in the median. If they manage to grow, they will do so by heaving the narrow sidewalk, a condition those of us who walk our neighborhood are familiar with. With no room for detours onto adjacent front lawns, Montrose eventually will be impassable for strollers and wheelchairs and an obstacle course for the rest of us.



*This old live oak on Mandell is growing in a strip 7 inches wider than the grass strip on Montrose.*



*South of Westheimer, there is more room for trees to grow and thrive – a condition that will be closely replicated north of Westheimer. However, the plan calls for wider sidewalks instead of the narrow sidewalk shown here.*

I am just one voice among many, but I suggest the Montrose TIRZ and City of Houston consider:

- Proceeding with the important drainage and roadway work in Phase One. This work should proceed now to be completed before the Ismaeli Center opens.
- Preserving the three large trees next to the cemetery on the west side of Montrose north of Dallas with a variance from the city for a narrower sidewalk next to them.
- As planned, carefully protecting the median trees south of Dallas Street during construction.
- Accepting the thirteen trees along the east sidewalk south of Dallas Street have a lot working against them – in some cases poor health and stunted growth, far too little room to thrive, and canopies being carved into a v-shape by Centerpoint. Replace them with 100-gallon trees behind the new curb that will be seven feet further away from the existing overhead power lines, which also will be moved back. This should prevent future v-shaped cuts (burying the power lines costs far too much).
- Looking carefully at the seven trees along the west sidewalk south of Dallas Street, two of which have barely grown since being planted. The other five vary in size and health but are not under power lines. Consider realigning the sidewalk around these five if they are in good health.
- Including wider sidewalks that also allow space for mature trees to thrive without heaving the sidewalk pavement, except at existing trees that are retained.



*The large trees on the west side of Montrose north of West Dallas and adjacent to a cemetery. The curb will shift to the left, allowing a narrow sidewalk.*



*The Ismaeli Center site plan allows for the roadway to shift left, and these small live oaks will be replaced by new trees along the new sidewalk.*

This decision is not mine to make, and these are simply suggestions from someone who has faced the tough call to preserve or replace existing street trees. The decision is now with Mayor Whitmire where it should be. I am confident he and his very capable staff are seeking a balanced solution. While I favor addressing flooding, poor roadways, better sidewalks and tree health head-on for the long term benefit of our neighborhood and city, I am sure Mayor Whitmire and his staff will make a fair decision.

*1 Under state law, tax increment zones are used by cities to improve infrastructure, address blight, and promote development. The City and participating taxing entities appoint their boards and exercise quite a bit of control over TIRZs. Their budgets, project plans, and issuance of bonds to pay for projects like this must be approved by the city in advance. Even with city approval, the Montrose TIRZ board chose to engage the public as it planned the project while also complying with the city's Infrastructure Design Manual, which limits design options unless the city grants a variance. While some of us may not like the results of this very public process, we all should keep in mind board members are unpaid volunteers committed to improving our neighborhood and Houston.*

MAMA has not taken a position on this issue.  
This piece reflects the opinion of one of our MAMA members.

# Are you aware

that the Montrose TIRZ is ready to start a street “improvement” project that plans cut down most of the majestic trees that line Montrose Blvd?

There are two phases: Phase 1 runs two blocks from Allen Parkway to W. Clay. Phase 2 continues the rest of the way down Montrose to the US 59 bridge. All trees on both sides of the street will be cut down in Phase 1 (57 trees). If this design is not changed, hundreds of trees are at risk in Phase 2.

Most median trees will remain but are endangered since 5 feet will be chopped off each side of the medians to allow the traffic lanes to be shifted inward. Narrowing the medians will threaten tree roots and require extreme chopping of their canopies for traffic to pass under.

Utility lines will be moved from along the new Ismaili Center where they are now, to the west side. This means the 160-year-old Three Sister Post Oaks, recently designated as Texas Historic Trees, will be cut down to accommodate utility poles.

For what benefit? On the East side, they plan to build a 10-foot wide shared-use path, with 8 feet of buffers on either side where they will plant small new trees. On the West side they plan a 6-foot sidewalk, with 12 feet of buffers. So much heat-radiating concrete with complete devastation of our shade canopy is illogical in our climate, and does not make for a more walkable or bikeable city.

Unfortunately, many civic clubs, like MAMA, were never given adequate information about the repercussions of this project. No one knew the extent of tree devastation until September 2023 when several of us formed Save Montrose Live Oaks. We've now gathered 7800 signatures seeking a tree-saving design. We have offered compromise options that will achieve the project's goals without killing all the trees. Mayor Whitmire has called for a pause in the project and has suggested a Town Hall.

Written by Dr. Georgia Hitchcock

Please join our efforts! Sign the petition at [www.Change.org/SaveMontroseLiveOaks](http://www.Change.org/SaveMontroseLiveOaks) and get updates from our website at [www.SaveMontroseLiveOaks.com](http://www.SaveMontroseLiveOaks.com)  
Read for yourself the TIRZ 100% plan document at [www.Montrosehtx.org](http://www.Montrosehtx.org) and attend their public board meetings held the third Monday of each month.