SAFE SYSTEM CASE STUDY

Making safe streets the goal in Austin, TX

KEY TAKEAWAY: Austin is reducing opportunities for high-risk conflicts by updating design standards, reframing mobility goals and aligning development review with safety outcomes. Systemic engineering treatments, paired with dedicated Vision Zero staffing and bond-funded investments, shift safety from reactive fixes to routine practice.

SAFETY LEVERS

Austin advanced from vehicle-centric planning and fragmented safety efforts to a more fully institutionalized Safe System approach by embedding safety into design manuals, long-range planning, development review and funding structures. Through updates to its design manual — known as the Transportation Criteria Manual — adoption of the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan and creation of a dedicated Vision Zero division, the city moved safety considerations upstream in the decision-making process. These changes emphasize preventing severe crashes through speed management, conflict reduction and systemwide consistency rather than relying on isolated or grant-dependent interventions.

City of Austin

Austin went from designing streets to move cars …

Old street design standards

- *Earlier versions of Austin's design manual optimized streets for vehicle throughput and travel speed, with pedestrian and bicycle facilities added only when required or convenient.*
- *One example was the use of channelized right-turn islands, which allow vehicles to make wide, fast turns while creating long pedestrian crossings and poor visibility.*

… to designing streets to prevent serious crashes

New street design standards

- The updated manual centers multimodal safety, traffic calming, reduced vehicle operating speeds and multiple layers of protection for vulnerable road users. Street designs are evaluated based on their ability to prevent serious crashes and protect vulnerable users.
- Newly adopted "smart" right turns have tighter radii, shorter and raised crossings, and pedestrian refuges. Turning speeds are slowed and sightlines are improved.

Austin went from planning for traffic flow …

Long-range plans for vehicle capacity

Planning documents emphasized roadway capacity expansion and congestion management.

… to planning around where people need access

Long-range plans for meeting mobility needs

The Austin Strategic Mobility Plan reframes mobility around safety, multimodal access, climate goals and mode shift. Each travel mode has a priority network, and these networks clarify locations throughout the city where access to destinations takes priority over maximizing travel speed and throughput. This shift led to bond approval for rail and bus service expansion.

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Austin went from checking a box on right-of-way decisions…

Similar right-of-way requirements for all projects

During development review, safety needs were rarely considered as part of right-of-way acquisition discussions.

… to using them to deliver better street designs

Right-of-way acquisition tailored to safety and multimodal outcomes

This ensures new development contributes to safer street cross sections, protected facilities and future Vision Zero corridors. The focus is now on transportation demand management strategies.

Austin went from scattered, short-term safety efforts …

Lack of an institutional home for Vision Zero

Vision Zero efforts were scattered across departments and dependent on intermittent grants or temporary funding.

… to dedicated staff with consistent funding

Creation of a Vision Zero division within the transportation department

The new division has built internal expertise and accountability. Using bonds beginning in 2016, Austin established stable, recurring funding for systemic safety projects.

What levers did this intervention pull?

PRIMARY: Austin's design and planning changes reduced the **likelihood of crashes** by simplifying intersections, improving visibility and embedding conflict-reduction principles into manuals, priority networks and development review.

SECONDARY: The changes reduced **severity** by managing turning and operating speeds through tighter geometry, traffic calming and speed-focused design thresholds.

SECONDARY: The new principles reduced **exposure** by focusing on transit expansion and reliability, people-centered development and place-making, and transportation demand management strategies in development review.

State and local DOTs can reduce crash injuries by lowering one or more of the following **SAFETY LEVERS**:

EXPOSURE	how much people drive
SEVERITY	how fast vehicles travel and how heavy they are
LIKELIHOOD OF A CRASH	how often road users come into conflict

What else can be done?

Rapid-deployment steps: Accelerate the use of temporary protected bike lanes, pedestrian refuges and raised crossings along priority networks in high-injury areas.

Policy/process trigger: Use bond programs, corridor reconstructions and design manual updates as triggers to require Safe System treatments on arterial streets and at high-risk intersections.

Continued data collection: Track operating speeds, conflict rates at redesigned intersections and completion gaps in protected bike and pedestrian networks. This information should be tracked overall and separately for equity priority areas.