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Dear Client:

It's almost here. One more edition of this weekly newsletter is all that remains. After exactly 40 years -- we are ceasing publication. It is triggering a bit of personal nostalgia. But, put that aside. Let's dive into this week's look at the Austin area.

Speaking of "looking," if you want to know about a major overhaul of downtown Austin, you can get an elaborate look at the future plans. It will be more than just a dog and pony show, it will be dogs and ponies with bells and whistles. The Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA) and the City of Austin call it "The Downtown You Will Always Love." They call the presentation a "celebration." And it will take place at the Austin Public Library downtown.

Plans are still evolving for the event April 30 (weeks after this newsletter ceases publication). But, based on preliminary announcements of what is currently in place, **they are going all-out to convince you the re-do of downtown will be spectacular** (my word, not their's). Some examples:

"Be the first to hear findings from our new State of Downtown report while enjoying some of the city's best food, drinks, and live entertainment," said DAA in a promotional piece. Okay, this is all well and good. But, what about the bells and whistles?

"Take a step into the future with our unique VR experience," DAA said. **"As the goggles go on, guests will be transported into a virtual world representing the future of Austin mobility."**

Or to put it another way: **"Guests will learn about the community's vision for the future of downtown – and how we are going to get there – through compelling speakers and hands-on activations featuring local artists and the latest technology."**

Okay, let's read between the lines. When DAA says "the future of downtown will certainly feature welcoming, engaging places for all to enjoy" the translation is likely to include **less auto access, less parking, wider sidewalks and more emphasis on bicycles and scooters**. Also, you need to raise some questions: **what will be the total cost, the impact on businesses and, importantly, will such a costly project with drastic changes be submitted for voter approval?** Participants at the 4:30 pm to 7 pm will be charged at least \$55 to be dazzled.

Next week, the Austin City Council is gonna consider the city's transportation policy for the next 20 years. It falls under the umbrella of the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan (ASMP). It includes all forms of mobility but, bottom line, the Plan's thrust is to encourage alternatives to cars. For some time now, aspects of the plan have been considered by different interest groups and city commissions. Now, it moves to the "enactment" level at the City Council.

So far, those with the loudest voices seemingly want the provisions of the plan to be as stringent as possible. Broadly, the Plan strives to get more acceptance of alternatives to cars. For instance, it's reported that **74% of Austin residents drive to work alone. Well, the plan calls for cutting that back to 50% in 20 years.** But if such auto reliance is reduced, there needs to be goals for alternatives. A growing workforce needs to work.

Okay, then what are the *alternative* goals ASMP strives to implement? The Plan suggests **increasing those who now ride bikes to work from 1% to 4%.** How about walking to work? The Plan wants to **increase walkers from 2% to 4%.** And the biggie – **increasing commuters who use public transit four-fold from 4% to 16%.**

This is only part of the effort to change driving-to-work habits. The Plan would roughly **double those who work from home, teleworkers, to about 15%** of the commuting force and **keeping the carpool share at 11%.** You get the picture. And there are those who will argue these numbers are not bold enough.

Opposition to this approach was articulated by **Janis Reinken**, who suggested to the *Austin Monitor* that it was misguided for Austin to look to other cities around the country, such as Portland, as models. She pointed out it may be **unrealistic to expect Austinites to adopt to other modes of transportation in the heat of a Texas summer.** That's not all she said.

"You tell a 4x4 pickup driver that he's not really going to have a choice of taking his car to work. He's going to have to get on a bus or bicycle to go," she noted. It's not just the pickup driver, and there are many of those on Austin roadways, take a mom with kids.

"You try telling a mom that's got a kid, and they've got a carrier in the back seat so they can keep the kid safe, that they're going to have to go to work on a bike or a bus, and if the kid gets sick they going to have to call an Uber ... these things aren't very workable for people who aren't agile," argued Reinken.

It's important to note ASMP really emphasizes adapting/building infrastructure that prioritizes transit. What does that mean? **Transit-priority lanes or reconfiguring stoplights so they offer priority to buses.** Oh yeah, parking is addressed, including installation of more meters citywide with the revenue to go toward sidewalk and bike infrastructure. March 28th is the Council meeting. See the last item for more on the growing issue of scooters.

It's not too early to mention the key role Texas will likely play in the selection of the next Democratic nominee for president. Of course, you know the only Hispanic (so far) seeking the nod of the Democrats – San Antonio Congressman Joaquin Castro – and the candidate who lost to GOP US Senator Ted Cruz last year – former El Paso Congressman Beto O'Rourke – are both in the race. No matter how they fare through the campaign and the debates, March 3, 2020 could be the most important factor for them and Texas. That's Super Tuesday.

It's called Super Tuesday, because *at least 41%* of the delegates to the National Democratic Convention, where the selection becomes official, will be selected on that important date a year from now. You may recall in past elections by the time Texans voted, other states had already cast their ballots and the nominee was already decided. Not this time. **Texas, California, and Massachusetts are the big prizes for the Democrats on Super Tuesday 2020**, even if other states join in and move their primary voting date also to 3.3.20.

The number of candidates are sure to be winnowed down after outcomes in the traditional early voting states – Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina. But the field of Dems should still be fairly large by Super Tuesday. Each state Dem party sets its own dates and rules by which delegates are selected. It's complicated. And not really important for now. **All you need to know now is that Texas will play an outsized role in the naming of the Democrats' nominee for president**, to run against **Donald Trump** (who will likely sit with glee on the sidelines with his Twitter phone in hand).

An internal battle is underway in Austin's residential real estate community. It involves some of the biggest brokerage and Realtor names/companies. The nerves are raw in some quarters. But some agents are ecstatic about what is happening. What is happening? A new-to-Austin residential real estate brokerage -- Compass -- came to town and attracted some high-billing agents away from long-time, well-respected companies. The tactics are being questioned.

Compass is being charged with paying big bucks up front, a signing bonus if you will, to agents to get them to leave their long-time successful companies. **“Rumors are rife that agents are being paid thousands of dollars to simply sign on – I've heard everything from \$50,000 to \$500,000 – but I've yet to verify any specifics,”** writes **Jan Buchholz** in her real estate blog.

Compass denied this, according to Buchholz, citing its agent healthcare program, interest-free loans for agents and its technology platform. But one big Austin brokerage founder, who lost key agents to Compass, told Buchholz **“In all the exit interviews I had, the financial incentives were THE reason these agents switched.”**

The situation should continue to simmer. It will be interesting to see how the Austin residential real estate marketplace reacts over the coming months.

Unless the agenda is modified, the March 28, 2019 Austin City Council meeting will focus on a number of issues that affect the way you get around throughout Austin, in addition to the issues previously discussed on page one. The Council will also be considering bikes and scooters. Get used to it. The new non-car mode of transportation – scooters – is likely to become even more prevalent.

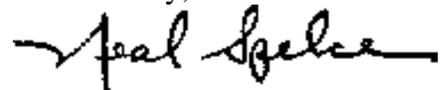
The fact that scooter usage during the recently-completed South by Southwest (SXSW) was, on average, **more than triple the previous month was not really indicative**. After all, the numbers swelled due to the hordes of SXSW attendees. And you gotta remember, scooters were not introduced to Austin last year until after South By.

However, scooter advocates (not to mention scooter companies) were heartened by the increased usage. A City of Austin transportation official said the experience overall was positive. And a City Council member was quoted as saying **scooters are ideal for getting from place to place in close areas**. Another city official expressed hope the scooters will alleviate car traffic.

Now the question is what to do about this new-to-Austin mode of transportation. Here's what you need to watch for. One debate centers around fines for those who violate scooter regs. To stop violators, **Council may consider a proposal to double fines**. But scooter backers argue that **excessive fines will run counter to Austin's plan to encourage alternative types of transportation**, encouraging the move away from reliance on cars. Stay tuned.

With just one more week remaining before we hang up our newsletter spurs, we want to remind you that we will still be focusing on Austin in our work-in-progress memoir (which will also include entertaining observations about people you'll recognize). We'll also make occasional contributions to LinkedIn. We would be remiss if we didn't mention how much we appreciate all the kind words from subscribers – some of whom have been readers during much of the 40 years of publication. Speaking of readers, Dr. Louis Overholster shared with us this classified ad he read on Craig's List: "FREE PUPPIES. Mother is a Kennel Club registered German Shepherd. Father is a Super Dog, able to leap tall fences in a single bound!"

Sincerely,



Editor/Publisher