

A Proposed Solution for the Garrott/Audubon Place Alley: A Needed Bicycle Path for the Houston Bikeways System

The Current State of the Alley

There is a City-owned alley between Garrott (in Westmoreland Historic District) and Audubon Place (in Audubon Place/Historic Montrose District). This alley runs between the intersection of Hawthorne and Taft, on the north end, and West Alabama, on the south end (as depicted below).



<https://www.google.com/maps/@29.7405388,-95.3881262,17z>. (The alley is circled in blue) Essentially, the alley is a four-block extension of Taft from Hawthorne southward to West Alabama.

Numerous adjacent houses on Garrott and Audubon Place have garages which face the alley. Historically, the City used the alley for trash collection, and police patrol officers routinely drove through the alley. Also, the alley has been used by residents as a pedestrian path to avoid the traffic and parking congestion on the adjacent streets (Garrott and Audubon Place).

In the past, the City has maintained this city-owned alley, but the City has not been willing or able to maintain the alley in recent years. In its present condition, this City-owned alley presents a huge problem for the neighborhood. Due to the lack of maintenance, the alley has become virtually unusable. Despite residents' periodic efforts, the vegetation has grown, the surface of the alley has developed depressions and ruts, and water often pools on the alley (especially near the midpoint as discussed below). All of these conditions make the alley non-traversable. As a result, many residents have been unable to access their garages which face the alley, and the residents have lost a safe path for traveling through the neighborhood.

Moreover, the alley has become a haven for vagrants, who camp, sleep and do other undesirable activities in the open in the alley. Residents frequently find blankets, clothes, food waste and human waste in the alley where vagrants have camped. Residents have also found used drug paraphernalia and used condoms. Residents have even caught vagrants in the act of having sex in the alley.

There is other criminal activity in the alley. Transients have damaged and defaced property that faces the alley, and they gain access to and burglarize properties from the alley. Also, residents often encounter transients in the alley when they open their garages or otherwise go into the alley.

As noted above, previously, police patrol officers patrolled the alley on a routine basis. However, they have been reluctant to do so due to the condition of the alley. As a result, the squatting and criminal activity in the alley has become virtually unchecked.

Due to the City's actions (or inactions), a serious flooding issue has developed along the alley. A sanitary sewer runs through the alley. One section of the sanitary sewer travels south from Hawthorne, and another section travels north from West Alabama (as shown below).



<http://verify.rebuildhouston.org/prod/mydrain.htm#> (Sanitary sewer line in red)

In recent years, the sanitary sewer was repaired extending approximately 150 feet from both ends of the four-block long alley, but the sanitary sewer was not repaired throughout the remainder of the alley. Apparently, there is an issue regarding the integrity of an unrepaired section of the sanitary sewer near the midpoint of the alley which may contribute to a large depression that fills with water and renders this part of the alley impassable whenever it rains.

Also, the City's prior maintenance of the alley has caused flooding on adjacent properties. Over the years, the City has added layers of caliche which has raised the level of the alley in places as much as 18 inches above the grade level of adjacent garage floors, patios and yards. This is most evident where the City has installed multiple concrete "doughnuts" stacked around manhole covers which access the sanitary sewer in the alley. This situation (created by the City) causes significant flooding in garages, adjacent patios and backyards on adjacent properties whenever it rains.

This situation presents significant issues that, by themselves, merit the City's intervention and attention. However, let's put these significant issues aside for the moment.

An opportunity for the City

This City-owned alley is unique, and it presents a forward-looking opportunity: *The alley is a strategic asset which can provide a critical piece for Houston's Bikeways system; and, therefore, the alley should be redeveloped as part of a new Houston Bikeways system route.*

The City and the HGAC have recognized a need for a north-south bicycle route from Allen Parkway south along Taft into Montrose. For example, the HGAC's Montrose Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan recommends: "Bicycle Route on Taft – Provide an additional north-south route along Taft, including a safe crossing at Allen Parkway." http://www.hgac.com/community/qualityplaces/pedbike/special-districts/documents/montrose_study.pdf.

This north-south bicycle route can follow Taft and extend through the alley to connect to the new West Alabama bicycle/pedestrian corridor (as shown below). The routing through the alley would avoid bicycle travel on Garrott and Audubon Place which have become congested by through-traffic between West Alabama and Westheimer, as well as crowded street parking on Garrott and Audubon Place.

The importance of this recommended north-south bicycle route is heightened with the expected completion of a major east-west bicycle/pedestrian corridor along West Alabama upon reconstruction of West Alabama from Wesleyan in the Greenway Plaza area through Upper Kirby and Montrose to Midtown in FY 2017 and FY 2018. The proposed designs for the West Alabama bicycle/pedestrian corridor are shown below:



https://www.rebuildhouston.org/images/pdf/alabama_handout.pdf. A quick glance at the Houston Bikeways system map shows the logical need for this north-south bicycle route (noted in red) connecting to the east-west West Alabama bicycle/pedestrian corridor (noted in blue).



https://bikehouston.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/BH_MAP_6.9.2015.pdf. (Routes added.)

This north-south bicycle route will provide increased bikeability/connectivity through the Houston Bikeways system, particularly to and from Buffalo Bayou and Montrose, as well as Upper Kirby, Greenway Plaza and Midtown via the West Alabama bicycle/pedestrian corridor.

The redevelopment of the alley as a bicycle route might open up new funding sources for the costs of reconstructing the alley. Also, the redevelopment would address other issues (discussed above) presented by the current condition of the alley.

This bicycle route idea is timely, as the City has embraced initiatives in support of bikeways for Houston. The redevelopment of the alley as a bicycle route could open up new funding sources. Also, the West Alabama Reconstruction Project is in its design phase currently, and the reconstruction is scheduled to start in FY 2017 (beginning at Wesleyan and moving eastward in four sections). The City should want to incorporate into the design this north-south bicycle route which would terminate into the east-west bicycle/pedestrian corridor along West Alabama. Furthermore, the City should want to coordinate the redevelopment of the alley with the reconstruction of West Alabama through the area.

The Proposed Redevelopment of the Alley

The alley should be redeveloped to serve a *multi-modal* use – for car, bicycle and pedestrian traffic. Residents will still need access to their garages which face the alley. Also, the alley can be redesigned with appropriate lighting and signage to serve this multi-modal use. Currently, there are electric service poles along the west side of the alley on which lights could be installed fairly easily and cost-effectively. Also, the alley should be reconstructed in a manner to reduce the flooding hazard to adjacent residential properties (some of which are listed on historic registries).

Once rebuilt, only residents with garages will be allowed to drive in the alley to access their garages, and police patrols will be able to access and patrol the alley. The presence of additional pedestrian and bicycle traffic, lighting and patrols should mitigate the criminal, security and vagrancy issues (discussed above) experienced in the alley.

To accomplish these goals, the City should (1) remove the previously-added layers of caliche down to grade, (2) replace the remaining old sanitary sewer system, and (2) reconstruct the alley using a permeable ground stabilization system, such as the DuPont GroundGrid system. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfH3ZakV4z4> for a demonstration of this type of ground stabilization system. Crushed granite or similar fill material can be used to fill the ground stabilization system, making the alley path resemble the jogging paths in Memorial and Hermann Parks. The application of this system would be usable by cars, bicycles and pedestrians, and it should be less costly than paving the alley with concrete. Furthermore, this system would be permeable (unlike concrete) which would reduce the risk of flooding in the area of the alley. Thus, this application should be practical, attractive, cost-effective and environmentally responsible.

Conclusion

In short, the proposed redevelopment of the alley would address the issues (discussed above) presented by the current condition of the alley, and it would serve the greater population of the City through this proposed enhancement of the Houston Bikeways system.