



TRANSPORTATION

Houston's New Mayor Pumps the Brakes on Street Safety Projects

Street safety is increasingly a source of conflict between state and local governments. Houston's new mayor has paused a series of redesigns.

April 11, 2024 • **Jared Brey**



Houston Mayor John Whitmire has made it clear he wants to keep traffic moving. The city had more than 300 pedestrian deaths last year.

(Photo courtesy of Mayor John Whitmire Facebook)

In Brief:

- Houston Mayor John Whitmire is conducting a review of projects that would add bike lanes and remove vehicular lanes on city streets.
- Advocates worry that a shift on transportation policy could jeopardize federal funds and put people at risk.
- The Texas Legislature and other state governments are increasingly hostile to urban road design projects.

A few months into his new job as mayor of Houston, John Whitmire has been laying out a much different vision for transportation and mobility than his predecessor.

The Whitmire administration has pumped the brakes on a series of projects that involve reconfiguring city streets to add bike lanes, create safer pedestrian crosswalks and in some cases remove or narrow vehicular lanes. It has requested a pause on all projects, including those already under construction, which involve lane reductions and on-street bike lanes.

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The change of direction has alarmed transportation safety advocates and other elected leaders in the area. Several prominent safe streets advocates who were in transportation leadership roles have recently left the city government. More than 300 people **died** on Houston's streets last year, a substantial increase from pre-pandemic figures that aligns with an upward trend of traffic violence nationally. Under Sylvester Turner, the previous mayor, Houston had adopted a Vision Zero strategy, aimed at eliminating traffic deaths and injuries.

But reducing risks in the transportation network involves redesigning roads that have been long-dominated by cars — a perennial political challenge for even the most committed officials. “We need to carefully balance our current and future

mobility needs for all Houstonians by providing a range of mobility options without affecting our existing mobility options,” Marlene Gafrick, Whitmire’s senior adviser for transportation and infrastructure, wrote in an email.

A Pause on Projects

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Houston became a Vision Zero city in 2019, when Turner signed an **executive order** setting a goal of eliminating deaths and serious injuries on city streets by 2030. Vision Zero campaigns incorporate a range of strategies, but emphasize redesigning streets to maximize safe space for all road users.

Such projects are often controversial locally, with nearby residents and businesses often opposed to sacrificing space that's been dedicated to parking or driving. Turner nonetheless pushed several such projects forward, including the **11th Street Bikeway**. That project includes a **road diet** — a term for reconfiguring roads to replace car lanes with space for other modes — and protected bike lanes along a 1.5-mile stretch. In March, Houston Public Media **reported** that Whitmire was “evaluating the project’s effectiveness” and had concerns about it.

By then, it was already clear that the winds were shifting on Vision Zero in the city. Earlier in the year, Veronica O. Davis, a renowned **transportation planner and author**, abruptly resigned as the city’s transportation director. Another top transportation planner, David Fields, was **reportedly forced out**.

In late February, Whitmire drew headlines for ordering the removal of medians that had been installed to make safer crossings on parts of Houston Avenue. He later said the design of that project was flawed and had been led by “anti-car activists in the previous administration,” according to **a *Houston Chronicle* report**.

The Houston Department of Public Works asked all the city’s Tax Incremental Investment Zone directors to pause “all projects with roadway diet (i.e.,

narrow lane to 10'), lane reduction, and on-street bike lanes," according to an email reviewed by *Governing*. The department said it would "provide decision[s] regarding each project upon receiving the authority from the mayor's office." A department spokesperson did not respond to a request to confirm the authenticity of the message.

"A review of mobility projects constructed in the last administration revealed newly constructed bike lanes removed residential and business street parking, failed to accommodate residential solid waste trash cans, negatively impacted emergency responders, and impacted our general mobility with reduced lanes," Gafrick wrote in an email. "The mayor supports preserving and or improving existing mobility options without reducing the number of traffic lanes or lane widths."

A bike rack alongside a light-rail line in downtown Houston. (David Kidd/Governing)



Street Design Increasingly Politicized

The shift in Houston's transportation focus comes as street redesigns are increasingly politicized around the country. They are becoming a more frequent site of conflict between state and local governments. Republican leadership at the state level in Texas has taken a particularly strong stance against reducing vehicular lanes. In one instance, the Texas Department of Transportation **stepped in** to block a long-planned — and voter-approved — road diet in San Antonio several years ago.

The state GOP's official **platform** says: "We oppose anti-car measures that punish those who choose to travel alone in their own personal vehicle, and oppose any measure to impose 'road diet' mandates designed to shrink auto capacity and/or intentionally clog vehicle lanes to force deference to pedestrian, bike and mass transit options (whose users do not pay gas tax)."

A new transportation law in Florida also **increases** public meeting requirements for projects that repurpose automobile lanes, as part of an effort to "prevent localities from agenda-motivated lane reductions to force people out of their cars," according to Florida GOP Gov. **Ron DeSantis**.

Whitmire is a Democrat, but a fairly **conservative one**. He served in the Texas Legislature for 50 years. He won election as mayor last year on a platform focused on crime, public safety and fiscal stability. An implicit part of his appeal was the notion that he'd have an easier time working with state lawmakers, rather than butting heads as so many Democratic-led cities have done with the Republican-led Legislature in recent years.

"Texas has taken a much heavier hand to local governing than at virtually any time in the state's history," says Brandon Rottinghaus, a political scientist at the University of Houston. "Whitmire made the case that he was better able to deal with some of those nuances."

Future of Vision Zero in Houston

Transportation safety advocates are worried about the fate of projects that are already in the works, including some that have received federal funding. They're

also worried about the long-term trajectory of transportation safety in Houston. Houston is a sprawling city, incorporating more than 600 square miles, and has long been known as a car-centric place. Recent surveys have shown an **uptick** in people professing support for multimodal transportation.

“Whitmire ran on a platform focused on public safety, and in a city that sees roughly 300 traffic deaths every year, it’s pretty clear that traffic safety is part of public safety,” says Joe Cutrufo, executive director of BikeHouston. “I think most people can agree that Houston needs a lot of improvement related to walking and biking infrastructure. I don’t know that Mayor Whitmire is one of those people.”

Whitmire is still early in his tenure and few local leaders have openly criticized his approach on an issue that is not a top-tier priority for many residents. But they have noticed the shift. Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis, a cycling advocate, says he tried to offer Veronica Davis a job after she resigned as the city’s transportation director. (Davis declined to comment on her departure.)

“I’ve heard the concerns of many advocates in the transportation space about what appears to be a reversal of some of the hard-fought progress on multimodal transportation and Vision Zero in the city of Houston,” Ellis says. “I am sensitive to their concerns.”

As for the city itself, Gafrick says the Whitmire administration is focused on building new sidewalks in areas that need them. Asked in an email what role Vision Zero plays in the mayor’s transportation agenda, she said, “Vision Zero is something we should strive for every day. Not wait until 2030.”

Advocates worry that a lack of support for street safety projects from the mayor’s office — let alone outright opposition — could jeopardize federal funding and reverse progress the city has made on multimodal infrastructure.

“Every single inch of space that we have worked to create toward a safer and more bike-friendly city is at risk,” Cutrufo says.

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