

Houston Heights residents, businesses divided about 11th Street bike lanes as mayor continues criticism

The \$2.3 million street safety project drew protest and praise before and after construction wrapped up in 2023. The recent removal of other cyclist protections has spurred concerns that 11th Street could be next.

After Houston Mayor John Whitmire's administration removed cyclist protections along [Heights Boulevard](#) and [Austin Street](#) in March, advocates for a contentious safety project on 11th Street in the Heights neighborhood are worried it could be next on the chopping block.

Construction finished in 2023 on a \$2.3 million project to add bike lanes and other safety features on 11th Street while reducing the number of lanes for cars and trucks. It drew protests and praise, from a [3,000-signature petition against the changes](#) to a [Project of the Year award](#) from the Texas chapter of the American Public Works Association.

The project has been under review by Whitmire's administration for more than a year. On Wednesday, he again criticized the project, saying businesses and residents don't like it and emergency personnel avoid the street. But, he said, the administration has not made a decision on its future.

"It's not my controversy," Whitmire said. "I'm just trying to solve it."

Businesses express mixed feelings

The 11th Street safety project runs more than 20 blocks, from North Shepherd Drive to Michaux Street. It reduced four lanes of vehicular traffic to three, including a central left-turn lane, and added two protected bike lanes.

Of the six business owners and managers who spoke to *Houston Public Media*, two expressed support for the project, three criticized the project

and called for its removal, and one expressed neutrality but opposed additional construction. The criticisms were generally undercut by data from Houston Public Works (HPW).

“The traffic is just horrendous, up and down the street,” said Bill Meeks, general manager of Republic Boots Co. “And then the concrete barriers are in the way. I've seen people come in, and they don't even realize they're there, and they get high-centered on those things. They damage their cars pretty significantly.”

Gus Kopriva, president of the Redbud Arts Center, described the project as “unsafe, underused and damn ugly.”

“People that are advocating this particular project as a safety project — it's total b-----t,” Kopriva said, pointing to vehicles hitting the concrete barriers and a perceived absence of cyclists in the bike lanes. “The big problem is the barriers. They are causing accidents quite frequently.”

Whitmire said the Houston Fire Department avoids 11th Street since it was revamped, although photos taken by proponents of the redesign show both fire trucks and ambulances have continued to travel on the street. The fire department deferred comment to the mayor's office.

The perceptions of higher traffic run counter to a [HPW study](#) first published by [Axios](#). It found overall traffic times “do not appear to have increased significantly” because of the changes, with drivers experiencing an additional seven seconds of travel time during the peak morning hours and eight seconds in the evening peak.

According to the HPW analysis, the project decreased collisions and increased the presence of cyclists and pedestrians. Injury-causing crashes along 11th Street during the study periods decreased from four in 2019 to zero in 2023. All crashes decreased from 25 in 2019 to 16 in 2023. The total daily east-west crossings of Heights Boulevard by pedestrians and cyclists increased from 87 in 2019 to 324 in 2024.

Gilbert Perez, owner of Bungalow Revival LLC and Bespoke by GJCD, has noticed the increase in pedestrian volume.

“I think the bike lanes have actually slowed traffic down quite a bit,” Perez said. “It makes it a much safer street for our clients to come in, for other pedestrians. My foot traffic has increased since the bike lanes were put in, and I think it brings people from the neighborhood to our businesses.”

According to the HPW analysis, vehicle speeds decreased from as much as 39 miles per hour to as low as 30.5 miles per hour. The speed limit on 11th is 30 miles per hour.

Sara Saber, owner of Three Dog Bakery, opened her shop just as construction began and felt “a little panicked.” Now, she said, “it feels safer as a pedestrian, for sure.”

Perez and Saber are part of a coalition of 18 businesses and organizations sending a letter to Whitmire’s administration, including A New Leaf elementary school, the parent-teacher association for Hogg Middle School, the Woodland Heights Civic Association and state Rep. Christina Morales. They call for the protection of the 11th Street redesign, which they say transformed a “high-speed, dangerous thoroughfare” into a “thriving and safe corridor.”

Ashley Wilson, assistant general manager at Loro Asian Smokehouse and Bar, said the project “doesn't really negatively affect us, but it also doesn't really positively affect us” — but additional construction to reverse the project would.

“More construction would be annoying for us because that's the way to get into our business,” Wilson said.

Residents, advocates call for protection after other mobility decisions

Houston Public Works last month removed cyclist protections from Heights Boulevard, which intersects with 11th Street, and from Austin Street in Midtown, a critical artery of the city's larger bike network.

"Bike lanes ought to be along our trails," Whitmire [told the *Houston Chronicle's* editorial board](#) last week. "I think bikes primarily are for recreation.

Multiple Heights residents told *Houston Public Media* the 11th Street project has made recreational biking more accessible. A central feature of the 11th Street project was an improved crossing at Nicholson Street, which runs parallel to a north-south hike-and-bike trail.

Jeff Warren moved his family to the Heights in 2018 because of its proximity to the hike-and-bike trail.

Before the safety improvements, Warren said, he "wouldn't let our younger kids go anywhere close to the street to cross" because of speeding cars, but now "it feels much safer to cross there."

The HPW analysis found a nearly 200% increase in cyclists and pedestrian use of the crossing after the project was completed, from 211 per day in 2018 to 623 in 2024.

The 11th Street bike lanes are also used by commuters to work and school, such as Rice University political scientist Bob Stein and his grandchildren.

"(Bicycles) are not a car," Stein said. "We actually do reduce congestion."

Stein said Whitmire's stance is "bewildering" because he's catering to people outside the City of Houston.

"He seems to be more concerned about suburban drivers and speed on these roads, which is exactly what has hurt the city," Stein said.

While a coalition of businesses call on Whitmire to leave the safety project in place, more than 100 mothers have criticized his actions on Austin Street and Heights Boulevard. They [wrote an op-ed](#) for the *Houston Chronicle* arguing the administration's moves show "direct disregard for the safety and well-being of families."

"I'd honestly love to see more bike lanes, not less bike lanes," co-author Ashley Blaylock told *Houston Public Media*. "We all deserve the freedom to move safely, whether by foot or by bike or by bus or by car, and the mayor is quietly removing these bike lanes and crosswalks that make our neighborhood safer. It's of course dangerous. But it's not just dangerous, it's also a waste of taxpayer money."

The recent reversals run counter to the [Houston Bike Plan](#), approved by city council in 2017. It aimed to develop a safe, citywide network of bike lanes.

Former planning director [Pat Walsh](#), who died from cancer in 2018, led the initiative. His widow, Lindsey Walsh, said Whitmire's administration is undoing his legacy.

"I'm a little concerned that we're moving backwards," Walsh said. "I'm surprised that he's taking out things that have been done and basically taking out someone's past vision for what the city could look like."

Whitmire described members of late former mayor Sylvester Turner's administration as "[anti-car activists](#)" when he removed another traffic and pedestrian safety initiative along Houston Avenue at the beginning of his first year in office. That move, along with other mobility decisions, contributed to the organization of Recall Houston, which aims to collect more than 60,000 signatures in 30 days in an effort to force a special election to remove Whitmire from office.

Whitmire declined to comment on the group during a news conference on Wednesday.

Lindsey Walsh said she donated the March portion of her late husband's pension to the group. She's hoping for more transparency, considering the lack of formal public engagement before removal of safety infrastructure over the last year.

"We should use the tools of democracy we have," Walsh said, pointing to times she's spoken at city council and attempted to communicate with Whitmire. "If there's different tools we can use to get attention to our issues, even if it's not successful, it allows people to get more information out there, and it pushes the mayor to give us more information."

Whitmire's administration announced its first walkback of an action to remove safety infrastructure last week. After [pushback from some residents and advocates](#) on the removal of concrete barriers along Austin Street, the administration arrived at a "[compromise](#)." Rather than being removed, the bike lane will be converted from a protected, two-way path to a one-way, unprotected lane.