



Ben Wear

Getting There

Bridge that isn't leaves a legacy of traffic

The backup on eastbound Barton Springs Road from the traffic light at Robert E. Lee Road, on the worst afternoons, runs all the way through Zilker Park and up MoPac Boulevard's northbound frontage road. That's almost a mile of stop-and-go through Austin's most iconic green space.

About a mile to the south, where Barton Skyway hits Barton Hills Drive, traffic is generally quiet at that time or, really, anytime. Just beyond the intersection, there's a stub of Barton Skyway about 100 feet long that dead-ends into the trees of the Barton Creek greenbelt, as if someone at one point had plans to extend it west.

Someone did.

That stub and those cars crawling through Zilker Park in the afternoon rush are not unrelated.

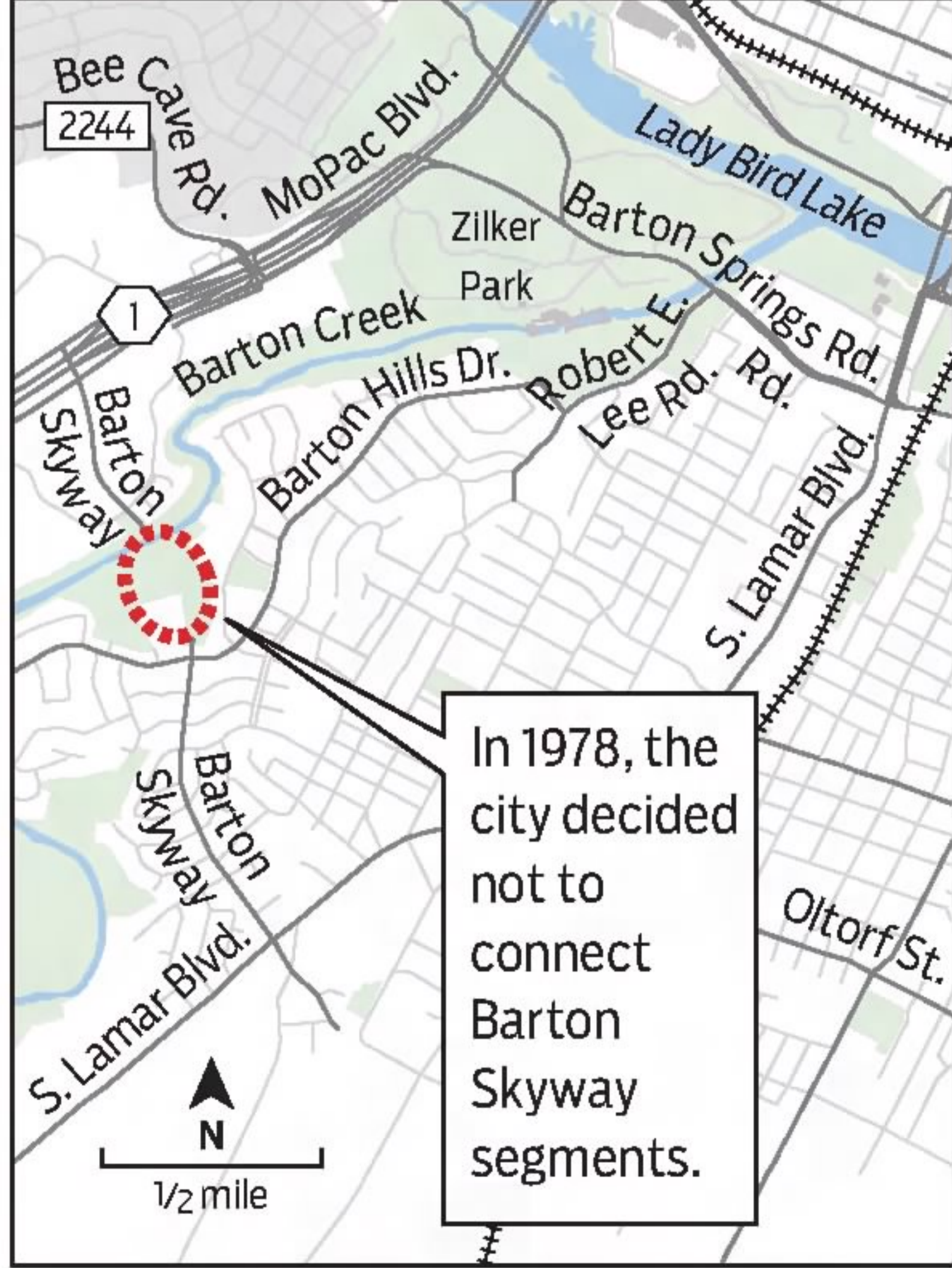
The connection goes back to the 1970s and illustrates a point I made recently in this column about "legacy" projects, about roads and rail and other infrastructure that forever change a city and how its residents live their lives. Sometimes that legacy is of projects that did not get built.

Like the Barton Skyway bridge over Barton Creek.

The original city plans for that part of town showed Barton Skyway extending over the deep gorge of the creek, then connecting to a likewise orphaned piece of Barton Skyway west of the creek that leads to MoPac (Loop 1). The city also had plans to close some gaps in Lightsey Road, which connects to Barton Skyway at South Lamar Boulevard and to Woodward Street at South Congress Avenue. Doing so would have created a continuous east-west arterial across South Austin.

People would have been able

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Robert Calzada/American-Statesman

Barton Skyway bridge plans nixed after heated hearing in 1978

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to go directly from Interstate 35 to MoPac on this route. And, like MoPac north of the river, which has exits every half mile or so with arterial roads connecting to areas east and west of the highway, MoPac south would have had a similar connec-

tion to the east in the two-mile gap between Barton Springs Road and Loop 360.

Beyond that, people who live in Zilker and Barton Hills would have had an additional, quick way to get out of their neighborhoods and go north or south.

The Austin school district in that era, anticipating the construction of the bridge, even changed school boundary lines to direct kids from those neighborhoods to O. Henry Middle School and Austin High north of the river.

Without that bridge, people who lived there had to go (and still do) to South Lamar or, to get to MoPac and go north, take Barton Springs Road (via Robert E. Lee, alongside Barton Creek). Getting home, those residents had only two ways to reach that area from MoPac: out-of-the-way Loop 360 and Lamar, or Barton Springs Road. This is where the afternoon jam comes in.

The bridge kept appearing and then disappearing from planning maps until 1978, when City Manager Dan Davidson asked the Austin City Council to au-

thorize \$175,000 for preliminary engineering on the bridge. This culminated in one of those festive public hearings endemic to Austin at the cramped old council chambers on West Second Street, this one with about 300 pro- and anti-bridge folks on hand. The debate lasted about three hours, the Statesman reported at the time.

The folks against the bridge, mostly concerned about traffic through their neighborhood, were clearly in the majority that night, the paper said. Betty Brown, who led the opposition, had on a T-shirt saying, "Endangered Species, Barton Skyway Homeowner."

Ultimately, the engineering didn't happen, nor did the bridge, and the right of way where it would have run eventually became dedicated parkland.

I walked through those woods recently, following a rocky path down the steep eastern slope of the valley to the serenity and beauty of the creek.

Given the wet spring, the stream had a brisk flow and the flora was lush. Fauna of

the Homo sapiens variety, with college finals done and coolers loaded, was plentiful a couple of hundred yards downstream at Campbell's Hole on the hot day, lounging on the limestone shelves and in the shallow water. Taking it all in, it was hard to argue that the scene would have been improved by the addition of thick concrete columns and the hum of traffic on a bridge high overhead.

But would it have been ruined? The creek as it passes under the Barton Springs Road bridge, for instance, is still a pretty nice place to be.

Anyway, it didn't happen.

Those backups on Barton Springs Road now are notable in that they occur in the afternoon, when people are returning home from work, not during the morning rush when people would be inbound for downtown. I know, because that's my primary route to and from work, and in the morning, as I'm eastbound, I never have to wait.

On my way home, I see those folks stewing in that long queue through the

park.

The city's Transportation Department is aware of the problem and working on it, Director Robert Spillar told me.

He said it's a complex situation, with heavy traffic in both directions all the way to Lamar and short left-turn bays. And the building boom of apartments and condos along Barton Springs and South Lamar has no doubt fed more people into that stream, with more to come.

But it also includes many people from Barton Hills and Zilker. You see them lined up in the outside lane, turning one after the other onto Robert E. Lee to head south.

But for those events that occurred more than three decades ago, perhaps many of them would be exiting at Barton Skyway instead and taking a much shorter route home. And the "park" in Zilker Park would not refer to the cars standing inert in that line.

That's a legacy too.

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James David Williford

James David Williford, 32 years old, died tragically as an innocent victim of a high-speed police chase on June 15, 2012 in south Austin, Texas.

James was born on January 4, 1980, in Austin to Miriam Stewart and Richard Summers.

He graduated from McNeil High School and shortly after began his pursuit of career choices