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## City program delivers small-scale improvements with neighborhoods' help

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Most weekdays, several dozen chattering elementary school students troop down St. Elmo Road and, when traffic looks clear, migrate across en masse while chaperones try to stop any approaching vehicles.

It's dangerous, say the chaperones, who work for after-school and summer programs at an apartment complex a block from St. Elmo Elementary School.

"Fortunately, I'm tall and able to get drivers' attention," said Megan Elkins, who oversees the summer and after-school programs.

"But people go hauling buns down that road, and they're usually not looking for kids."

Construction began July 12 on crosswalks, bicycle lanes and medians, welcome relief to residents along St. Elmo. That alone wouldn't be news beyond this South Austin neighborhood. It's how the city is getting the work done that is noteworthy.

The project is the first to be carried out as part of a new city program that officials hope will stretch limited construction dollars across more neighborhoods.

The idea behind the Neighborhood Partnering Program is fairly simple. Instead of relying on a list of projects compiled years in advance and waiting in a queue for scarce dollars, the city invites neighborhoods to bring forward small-scale proposals, such as park improvements and sidewalk upgrades, that neighbors are willing to help carry out.

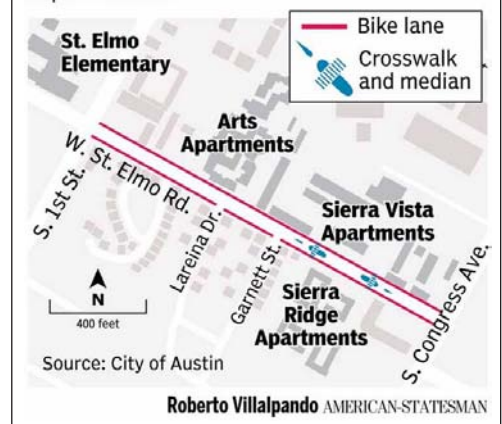
For approved projects, the city provides oversight, materials and insurance. Neighborhoods typically contribute volunteers to do the digging and other labor, maintenance and upkeep.

The idea was proposed by Bill Spelman during his 2009 City Council campaign. Spelman envisioned something roughly mirroring an established program in Seattle. The city staff then spent a year working through various issues, which include:

- Avoiding legal liabilities.
- Ensuring that an entire neighborhood wants a project, a consensus the city did not secure a few years ago when a speed hump initiative left neighbors shouting at one another.

### Neighborhood upgrades planned

The City of Austin and Foundation Communities are splitting the cost of installing crosswalks and bike lanes on St. Elmo Road. It's the first project in a new program in which the city and neighborhoods split the cost of small-scale improvements.



- Spending available money evenly around the city, not just in the more politically connected neighborhoods.

The city says it has set up a process to address those issues. It requires proof, such as minutes of neighborhood association meetings, that an area is solidly behind a project. And the initial projects are distributed across Austin, although program coordinator Sara Krause said she will try to make contact with more neighborhoods and organizations to solicit ideas.

Last year, the city set aside \$700,000 for the program this fiscal year.



(Kelly West AMERICAN-STATESMAN)

Children from the Foundation Communities after school program play in the front lawn at Sierra Ridge Apartments on Friday, July 22, 2011, near where a new crosswalk will soon be installed.

So far, 26 projects either have been approved or are close to approval, at a cost that might come in around \$700,000. They range from a community garden near West Gate Boulevard to an arch over Lamar Square to a picnic area in a Crestview park.

"The cool thing about this program is you can approach the city with some novel ideas," Krause said. "I like people bringing lots of ideas to the table. We don't always know what we can do right away."

As it turns out, some of the arrangements are more complicated than the original city-brings-the-plans-and-materials-and-the-neighbors-do-the-digging formula.

For instance, the St. Elmo Road project was not proposed by a neighborhood group, but by Foundation Communities. And the nonprofit group is providing money to help cover the costs of construction, instead of labor.

Foundation Communities manages two low-income apartment complexes, Sierra Vista and Sierra Ridge, which face each other across St. Elmo Road, a block from the elementary school. The nonprofit also runs summer and after-school programs at Sierra Vista.

Between the complexes and the programs, about half of St. Elmo Elementary's students are involved with Foundation Communities, according to the organization.

After hearing about the Neighborhood Partnering Program, Foundation Communities contacted the Still Water Foundation, which offered a \$30,000 grant. Foundation Communities then provided records from neighborhood association meetings showing that residents were overwhelmingly in favor of such improvements, Krause said.

The city eventually agreed to pay a \$38,000 match for designing and building the crosswalks, bicycle lanes and medians that will provide a place for pedestrians to stop if traffic is heavy. The work is scheduled to conclude in two weeks.

Spelman said that if interest in the program continues and if money continues to be distributed evenly, he might suggest increasing its budget in the coming fiscal year, which will start in October.

"We need to be careful, because this is still in the early stages," Spelman said. "But I think there's potential here."