

# Pedestrian hassles along Oklahoma City's E.K. Gaylord Boulevard wait to be addressed

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Only one street in downtown Oklahoma City was conceived by the internationally renowned architect and planner I.M. Pei. And that street, born in an age where every effort was being made to create a modern 21st century downtown, also may be among the least popular today.

At six- to seven-lanes wide and running from NW 4 and Reno Avenue, E.K. Gaylord Boulevard is rarely the cause of traffic jams. The giant parking garages that form a canyon along the north-south street can empty out hundreds of cars at once — with still relatively short backups at nearby traffic lights.

And when the street opened up in the early 1970s, vehicular traffic was one of the only concerns facing planners as they laid out E.K. Gaylord Boulevard in a path that was once filled with old warehouses that for decades acted as the western boundary of the wholesale district.

The raised BNSF Railway viaduct lined up the east side of this virtual canyon, and nobody envisioned pedestrians wanting to cross the thoroughfare to visit the dilapidated old warehouses and the forgotten Deep Deuce community on the other side of the tracks.

More than three decades later, E.K. Gaylord Boulevard is no longer seen as the boundary of downtown. Instead, it has become a massive barrier separating the central business district from a wholesale district turned into the thriving Bricktown entertainment district, and a Deep Deuce that has been transformed into a vibrant mixed-use urban neighborhood.

For pedestrians, the street only offers a narrow sidewalk running up against blank concrete walls of the parking garages along the southbound lanes and no sidewalk along the northbound lanes. Traffic still speeds along the thoroughfare at a fairly fast clip

In a report delivered to Oklahoma City in 2008, nationally recognized walkability consultant Jeff Speck noted the street carried 12,482 cars a day, not enough to justify more than two traffic lanes for either direction. He suggested the street be narrowed, curbside parking spaces be added, and a sidewalk be added along the northbound lanes. He also noted safer, brighter crosswalks are needed along E.K. Gaylord Boulevard.

Urban enthusiasts in Oklahoma City cheered Speck's report, and were even more

encouraged when a transformation of E.K. Gaylord Boulevard was included in Project 180, a makeover of downtown streets, sidewalks and parks funded through a tax increment financing agreement with Devon Energy.

The immediate prospects for that makeover are in question, however, as city staff struggles with the reality they don't have as much money for downtown makeover Project 180 as once thought, and costs of other improvements are running higher than expected.

Their proposed solution is to eliminate E.K. Gaylord Boulevard from Project 180 and hope they get a federal transportation grant to pay for the street reconstruction along with portions of a transit hub targeted for the adjoining Santa Fe Depot.

It's a gamble. The city hoped to win a similar grant last year to build the Skydance pedestrian bridge over the new Interstate 40. That grant application was rejected, and the designers were then instructed to scale down the project.

City planners don't deny E.K. Gaylord Boulevard is an anachronism of past policy that sacrificed pedestrian needs to ensure motorists could leave downtown as fast as possible. Cathy O'Connor, president of the Alliance for the Economic Development of Oklahoma City and a veteran of city government, is confident that if the federal grant doesn't materialize, the pedestrian nightmare known as E.K. Gaylord Boulevard will someday be transformed, once and for all.



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