



Parts of Austin's Festival Beach Food Forest to be uprooted by Utility Relocation related to TxDOT's IH35 Corridor Project

AUSTIN, TX – January 26, 2026 – Festival Beach Food Forest (FBFF), a 3-acre, volunteer-led permaculture food forest fiscally sponsored by the 501(c)3 nonprofit Fruitful Commons, is currently facing unexpected and significant disruption to its city-approved expansion due to an Austin Wastewater pipeline relocation. Due to the FBFF's lack of awareness of this disruption until a few weeks before it is set to take effect, the FBFF team is requesting an immediate pause to allow for a permaculture-based approach to this utility project and the impacted area.

- The area currently slated for excavation is part of the food forest and was made possible by the 2024 & 2025 City of Austin Urban Forest Grants.
- FBFF remains deeply grateful for these grants and the support of Austin Parks and Recreation, who have invested tens of thousands of dollars and expertise into this soil.
- Over 100 volunteers have spent the last year planting more than 90 trees and shrubs in this specific area, including several plants specifically chosen to complement a 40-year-old Mountain Laurel in the space that will be killed during the pipeline installation.
- Despite having quarterly meetings between the FBFF community and TxDOT representatives, the plan to lay a temporary wastewater pipeline through the site was never mentioned by TxDOT or city stakeholders.

This utility project is part of the broader TxDOT I-35 Capital Express Central Project. Part of the promised mitigations included in the project's Environmental Impact Survey included quarterly meetings with the community to address concerns and upcoming construction impacts. For the past 18 months, community members were repeatedly notified about dust, noise, and reduced parking related to construction, but the installation of a new wastewater pipeline was never mentioned until an email notice on January 6, 2026. Now this work is slated to begin in less than a month and will uproot portions of the FBFF's newly established Phase 2 Expansion.

While FBFF leaders have worked hand-in-hand with Austin Parks and Recreation and Urban Forest Department for over a decade, the pressures of I-35 expansion have led to a breakdown in inter-departmental coordination. The utility project was approved without the knowledge of FBFF stewards or the City departments that have most recently funded and supported the site's growth. When the project went for approval in front of the Parks and Recreation Board in November 2024, the firm representing the project, Pape-Dawson Engineers, was asked directly if it would impact FBFF. They assured the Board it would not.



FBFF estimates that this wastewater pipeline will affect approximately \$550,000 in parkland investments that were not accounted for in the easement negotiations, including volunteer hours with an in-kind economic value of \$375,000.

FBFF is a unique community and environmental asset, built on a longstanding collaboration between community members and the parks department since 2012. Phase 2 expansion was granted by the City Council in 2021 (See memorandum to [Resolution No. 20210729-115](#)) and formalized through a legally binding Parkland Donation, Improvement, Maintenance, and Programming Agreement. The current TxDOT-driven relocation of city utilities has created a direct conflict with years of city-approved work.

State code “Chapter 26” requires high transparency and stakeholder engagement when reallocating parkland for non-park purposes. “I seriously question whether state law was upheld in this case, given that the food forest community leaders and our fiscal sponsor Fruitful Commons are documented as co-stewards of this city parkland area since 2021, but were not given written notice of the public hearings at the PARD Board meeting in November 2024 or Austin City Council meeting in January 2025,” says Aly Tharp, FBFF steering council coordinator and core volunteer of 10 years. “We were not notified in writing, or in any way, until January 6, 2026.”

FBFF is also currently responding to another Chapter 26 public hearing process about two proposed new transmission towers for Austin Energy in the food forest and adjacent community garden’s fence-line, also related to the TxDOT highway expansion. Festival Beach Food Forest is not seeking to stop necessary infrastructure, but rather wants to ensure the cultural and ecological landscape of community-led stewardship at Festival Beach is respected. “Festival Beach Food Forest shows what’s possible when communities and cities work together to generate vital ecosystems, grow food, calm nervous systems, and practice shared stewardship at a time when our social fabric is under unprecedented strain. Fruitful Commons recognizes the City’s authority to undertake infrastructure work within public easements. That authority also creates an opportunity: with thoughtful coordination and leadership, this moment can become a celebrated example of how public agencies and residents can strengthen our city together.” - Jodi Lane, Executive Director, Fruitful Commons.

We are requesting an **immediate pause to installing this wastewater pipeline in the food forest** to allow for a permaculture-based approach to this utility project and the impacted area, which would allow time for the FBFF team, City, and TxDOT stakeholders to:

- 1. Align utility needs with the existing City-approved Food Forest plans and formally address communication breakdowns, ensuring that legally binding community partnerships agreements are honored (such as construction schedule and scope clarity, identified site superintendent, and a single City point of accountability).**



- 2. Ensure that any easement funds received by the city are directly reinvested into FBFF to repair damage and compensate for lost materials and community labor.**
- 3. Mitigate the environmental impact by supporting the preservation of as many plants and materials, including soil, during the construction process, so they can remain a part of the Food Forest ecosystem, and specifically assess the feasibility of preserving the mature Mountain Laurel.**

FBFF is hopeful and committed to working with city and state partners to find a path forward that honors both the city's infrastructure needs and the forest's community of people and plants.

Media Contact: Angelina Alanis, contact@festivalbeach.org, 512-680-4873

About Festival Beach Food Forest (FBFF)

The Festival Beach Food Forest is a community-led, public food forest located on parkland in Austin, Texas. It serves as a living demonstration of permaculture design and resiliency, providing free food, education, and community connection.

FBFF invites the community to join us in the forest to witness the beauty of what we have built and help us mitigate the damage of this utility project. We will be hosting community workdays to relocate plants and trees. We have started a petition to pause the work and invite community members to sign and follow our Instagram page or visit our website for the latest information and further ways to amplify our requests.

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