

HOT CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

WTS HOT Chapter Newsletter June 2026 | Volume 2



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President's Letter



Greetings WTS Heart of Texas Chapter!

I'm excited to share all the incredible things our Chapter has accomplished this quarter. From engaging events to community outreach, we've been hard at work sharing how our region enhances infrastructure and connectivity.

To keep up to date with all we are doing in real time, make sure you are subscribed to our [emails](#)! Additionally, be sure to follow us on all platforms, including our [website](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Instagram](#) pages, to stay up-to-date with upcoming events and highlights.

Quarterly Highlights

April

- We kicked off the month with our **Sustainability Networking event**, where we partnered with the local chapters of Society of Women Engineers (SWE Austin) and Society of Hispanic Engineers (SHPE Austin) to host a clothing swap and donation drive at Austin Community College's Highland Campus.
- Our **April luncheon** featured a series of presentations discussing efforts by CapMetro and CARTS to improve transit in the Central Texas region.
- We participated in the **2026 Girlstart Austin Girls in STEM Conference** on April 18th.
- On April 25th, we hosted our **22nd Annual Gala** at the Hyatt Regency Austin, recognizing our 2025 Chapter Award recipients and awarding scholarships to exceptional young women pursuing transportation-related studies. Thanks to your support, we raised a **record-breaking \$55,000** for our Scholarship and Transportation YOU programs!

May

- A delegation of **WTS HOT Chapter board leaders and members attended the WTS International Conference in Los Angeles!** We connected with over 1,200 attendees and were proud to again earn Gold Chapter status, the highest level of recognition.
 - Mark your calendars: the 2027 International Conference will celebrate the 50th anniversary of WTS and will be held the first week of May in Washington, DC!



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- We celebrated *Bike Month* with several events:
 - Our **May luncheon** featured a presentation from John Eastman and Nathan Wilkes presenting a review and update of the City of Austin Sidewalk, Bicycle, and Trail Program
 - We co-hosted our annual **Bike & Brunch** with the Capital Area Section of ITE, exploring the newly opened City of Austin Wishbone Bridge and networking with CASITE members.

- We also held our first **Lattes and Leadership** session of the year with **Robyn Miga from the City of Liberty Hill**.

June

- We had a great **Consuela Connects Give Back Party** event on June 13 where we gathered at the Austin Consuela location to share a fun, profit-sharing shopping event with sips, sweets, and great company to support the WTS Heart of Texas Foundation!
- Our **June luncheon** featured a panel discussion titled "After the Flood: 1 Year Lookback," where regional leaders reflected on the July 4, 2025 Central Texas flooding, shared lessons learned on infrastructure performance, and honored the impact of the event.
- We also hosted the June **Lattes and Leadership** session, with Erika Kemp, Strategic Initiatives and Innovation Division Director at TxDOT.

Check out the full newsletter for event photos, spotlights on our 2026 Honorary Member - Dr. Michelle Cohen, and profiles of our scholarship and award winners.

Upcoming Events

July

- **Summer Bowling Night Social** at Highland Lanes – July 15
- *Lattes and Leadership* session

August

- *Lattes and Leadership* session
- **Annual Appreciation Event** for Corporate and Agency Partners and Members at the Archer Hotel – August 27

September

- *Lattes and Leadership* session
- **Annual Professional Development Seminar** at Maggiano's – September 26

If you have questions or want to get more involved, don't hesitate to reach out.

Stay safe and hydrated this summer - we look forward to seeing you at an upcoming event!

Laura M. Friello

Laura Friello, PE

President, WTS Heart of Texas Chapter



Professional Clothing Swap & Donation Drive

The WTS membership committee was proud to partner with the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) to host a networking and professional clothing swap event at Austin Community College's Highland Campus.

The event brought together students, industry professionals, educators, and community members for an afternoon focused on career development, mentorship, and sustainability. Students had the opportunity to connect with transportation and engineering professionals, explore career paths, learn about scholarship opportunities, and obtain professional attire to support upcoming interviews and career pursuits.

Thanks to everyone who contributed by donating gently used business attire, sharing career experiences, and engaging with the next generation of STEM leaders.



Girlstart Austin Girls in STEM Conference



WTS Heart of Texas participated in the 2026 Girlstart Austin Girls in STEM Conference, an event for girls in 4th-8th grade to discover the fun side of STEM careers through hands-on workshops hosted by women in STEM.

This year, students participated in building and racing Balloon Karts, an interactive activity designed to introduce girls to Newton's Laws and how they apply to transportation engineering. Using paper tubes, soda caps, a balloon and a straw, students tinkered with their karts, finding the best design to win a race with their classmates.

WTS Heart of Texas would like to thank all of the volunteers who made the event a success!



APRIL LUNCHEON

CapMetro transit planner Lawrence Dieter kicked off the April luncheon by diving straight into data from the agency's recent Transit Plan 2035, a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing public transportation in Central Texas. The plan focused on improved services, infrastructure upgrades, and community engagement. CapMetro currently serves an impressive 529-square-mile area, but as Lawrence pointed out, riders' needs don't stop at city limits. Through a detailed market analysis of the existing system, he identified where stronger connections are needed to better support regional mobility. Several growing communities stood out as priorities for additional transit support, including Cedar Park, Round Rock, Pflugerville, Georgetown, and Buda/Kyle.

Building on this conversation, Julie Mazur, CapMetro's Manager of Regional Coordination Planning shared how targeted strategies can help bridge service gaps through expansion areas. These expansions are especially valuable for creating reliable links between non-urban and urban areas. Julie also highlighted the role of Transit Plan 2035 in identifying transit needs through surveys and helping communities explore alternative transportation options.

Julie also took a moment to recognize Tina Porter, the region's sole trip planning specialist. In 2025 alone, Tina assisted more than 600 community members with transportation needs. Requests ranged from simple navigation help to coordinating critical trips, such as ensuring patients could safely reach dialysis appointments—all while remaining mindful of fixed incomes.

To close out the discussion, Dana Platt highlighted transit service in rural communities through CARTS. Their "One System, Multiple Services" approach allows transit solutions to be tailored to each jurisdiction's unique needs. Dana also spotlighted the East Side Bus Plaza, a key community resource offering a Greyhound connection and full amenities, including air conditioning. The plaza provides a safe, comfortable space and plays an especially important role for more vulnerable community members.



MAY LUNCHEON

The WTS Heart of Texas Chapter was honored to host representatives from the City of Austin, including John Eastman, Sidewalks and Urban Trails Division Manager, and Nathan Wilkes, Transportation and Public Works Department Senior Multimodal Street Designer. Their presentation highlighted Austin's innovative, program-based approach to delivering sidewalks, bicycle facilities, trails, and transit improvements that are making the city safer, more connected, and more accessible.

Since passage of the 2016 and 2020 Mobility Bonds, Austin has invested more than \$1.1 billion in transportation improvements. By shifting away from traditional project-based thinking, the City has delivered hundreds of projects more quickly and cost-effectively—reducing design costs by approximately 25% and shortening delivery timelines by up to 75%. These efforts are evident across the city, including the build-out of Austin's sidewalk network from 44% completion in 2012 to nearly 80% today, as well as the delivery of 146 enhanced bus stops.

A key focus of the presentation was Austin's All Ages & Abilities (AAA) Bicycle Network, which is guided by five core design principles: cohesion, directness, safety, comfort, and attractiveness. The network integrates protected bike lanes and intersections, neighborhood bikeways and shared streets, intersection crossings, urban trails, and shared-use paths to create safer, more connected travel options for all users.

The presenters also emphasized the importance of addressing spatial constraints while minimizing impacts to surrounding neighborhoods and the environment. Guided by the "Pivotal Ps"—People, Planning, Programs, and Process—the city has successfully balanced accelerated project delivery with thoughtful design, environmental stewardship, and meaningful community engagement.

Perhaps the most impactful takeaway was that these projects represent more than infrastructure investments—they are safety investments. Through these strategic improvements, Austin continues to reduce crash risks, enhance mobility, and build a transportation network that better serves residents of all ages and abilities.



ANNUAL BIKE AND BRUNCH

On May 16, 2026, WTS and CASITE hit the trails for our annual Bike and Brunch event. This year's ride/walk featured the newly constructed Wishbone Bridge, a striking addition to Austin's trail system, and was led by Genest Landry, Assistant Director of the City of Austin Capital Delivery Services Department, who was the original City Project Manager during the project's design phase.

The tour began at the Unity Underpass, where an expansive mural showcases the work of local community artists—demonstrating how form and function can beautifully coexist. The Wishbone Bridge not only provides stunning 360° waterfront views at its center but also serves a critical purpose by connecting the Lady Bird Lake Trail to Roy G. Guerrero Park.

At the bridge, Genest shared fascinating insights and behind-the-scenes stories about what it took to deliver the project ahead of schedule and under budget. Through strong community engagement, the City was able to establish the final project direction in 2018. The bridge officially opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on February 7, 2026, and has since quickly become a local landmark.

After a 7-mile bike ride or a 3-mile walk, WTS and CASITE members wrapped up the morning with a celebratory brunch at Central Machine Works.



CONSUELA CONNECTS EVENT



The chapter hosted a profit-sharing event at Consuela on Saturday, June 13. Members enjoyed sips and sweets while browsing the colorful collection and catching up. Thank you to everyone who joined us and made a purchase! Your support helps fund scholarship and mentoring programs through the WTS Heart of Texas Foundation.

JUNE LUNCHEON

The June WTS Heart of Texas Chapter luncheon, *After the Flood: A One-Year Lookback*, explored lessons learned from the devastating Fourth of July flooding that impacted Williamson County and surrounding communities in 2025. The panel brought together local leaders who played key roles in emergency response, recovery, and infrastructure management to reflect on successes, challenges, and opportunities for future resilience. Panelists included Williamson County Judge Steve Snell; Thomas Hunter, City Manager for the City of Liberty Hill; Rousner Ermonfils, Assistant Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Leander; and Christy Rogers, Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Georgetown. The panel was moderated by Laura Friello, our WTS HOT Chapter president. Through a candid discussion, the panel shared firsthand perspectives on emergency preparedness, interagency coordination, infrastructure performance, and the actions their organizations have taken during the year since the flood event.

The discussion opened with reflections on the extraordinary scale and complexity of the Fourth of July flooding event. Williamson County Judge Steve Snell described how normally dry creek beds quickly transformed into dangerous floodwaters, ultimately resulting in the loss of two lives. One of the most memorable rescue operations involved Hope House, a residential care facility located in a rural area where flooded roads made access difficult. Judge Snell recalled receiving a call from the facility's manager approximately 15 minutes before a National Weather Service alert was issued, reporting that residents and caretakers were trapped by rising waters. Two helicopters were ultimately deployed to evacuate those on site, though the facility itself was lost. Judge Snell noted that emergency management initially focuses on rescue efforts before transitioning into the longer-term recovery phase, and he praised first responders for their courage and professionalism under extraordinarily difficult conditions. Rousner Ermonfils, Assistant Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Leander, echoed those sentiments, sharing that Leander deployed responders to both Travis and Williamson counties and even found themselves rescuing first responders who had become stranded. For Rousner, that moment underscored just how dangerous the situation had become and demonstrated the value of training, preparation, and strong interagency partnerships.

Thomas Hunter, City Manager for the City of Liberty Hill, highlighted the significant role the private sector played in the response, providing critical materials and helping manage the disposal of debris and cleanup materials. Christy Rogers, Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Georgetown, described a similar shift from a relatively normal holiday celebration to a major emergency. Georgetown had successfully hosted its fireworks event and initially experienced only light rainfall, but later that evening the South Fork of the San Gabriel River rose to levels not seen since 1956. Early communication from upstream communities that had experienced significant rainfall provided valuable advance warnings, allowing Georgetown to activate response teams before floodwaters arrived. The city ultimately evacuated several apartment complexes, sustained approximately \$11 million in damage to public infrastructure, and lost an estimated 29 million gallons of potable water when a water main beneath the river was damaged.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the power of collaboration. Judge Snell shared that approximately 150 homes were flooded in the Liberty Hill area and that volunteers arrived in overwhelming numbers to help affected residents. While the outpouring of support was inspiring, it also created significant logistical challenges. His advice to future volunteers was simple: let emergency managers know what skills, tools, and equipment you can provide and allow them to direct those resources where they are needed most.

Looking beyond the immediate response, Judge Snell identified river cleanup as one of the most significant recovery challenges. State agencies ultimately removed approximately 800,000 cubic yards of debris from local waterways—an effort estimated at \$55 million. He remarked on the remarkable ability of agencies with different missions, policies, and procedures to set aside their differences and work toward a common goal during a crisis.

The panel concluded by emphasizing the importance of incorporating long-range drainage studies into infrastructure planning, leveraging post-disaster mitigation funding to rebuild more resilient systems, and maintaining strong partnerships among local governments, state agencies, and organizations such as TxDOT, which assisted with bridge inspections following the event. Their collective closing message was clear: no community can respond to or recover from a disaster alone.



MAY LATTES & LEADERSHIP



Lattes and Leadership was developed to function as a roundtable to interact in a relaxed environment and learn from different speakers about issues such as leadership, career goal setting, lessons learned along the way, navigating the transportation world, and life coaching-type elements.

Lattes & Leadership kicked off for the year on May 28 at Genuine Joe Coffeehouse with an engaging discussion led by Robyn Miga from the City of Liberty Hill. Robyn serves as the Planning & Development Director for the City of Liberty Hill, bringing over a decade of experience in municipal planning. In her role, she oversees development to ensure alignment with the community's vision through the implementation of city policies. Liberty Hill is currently developing a five-year strategic plan to guide future growth and development.

JUNE LATTES & LEADERSHIP

Lattes and Leadership continued in June with a discussion led by Erika Kemp, PMP, from TxDOT. Erika is a seasoned leader with over thirty (30) years of experience driving results-oriented initiatives and providing strategic direction across various industries. Renowned for her expertise in delivering efficient and effective operations, Erika's leadership style is characterized by a balanced approach emphasizing exceptional customer experience, collaboration, results-driven passion, and operational excellence.

Currently serving as Strategic Initiatives and Innovation Division Director at the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), Erika oversees a wide array of strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing transportation systems. She is instrumental in fostering a culture of innovation through the Innovative Transportation in Texas program, which includes initiatives such as an innovation academy, awards, and transformative leadership. Additionally, Erika leads enterprise-wide programs focusing on data science, performance management, risk management, continuity of operations, policy development, and governance. She also sponsors collaborative consortia, such as the Connected and Autonomous Vehicle Task Force, Texas Transportation Technology Task Force, and the Texas Innovation Alliance, which bring together stakeholders from diverse sectors to facilitate the exchange of best practices and drive the implementation of innovative initiatives.

Prior to her current role, Erika held leadership positions within the Transportation Programs Division, where she led the Modernize Portfolio and Project Management (MPPM II) Initiative. In this role, she successfully planned and implemented a complex technological initiative, significantly enhancing the agency's core function to develop capital infrastructure projects.

With a background spanning 16 years at AT&T, where she held various leadership roles, including Vice President of Sales Operations for the Southeast Region and Vice President/General Manager for the Virginia and West Virginia markets, Erika brings a wealth of experience to her current position. Her career began with the successful launch of Pacific Mobile Systems' wireless phone operations in San Diego, CA.



HONORARY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Commissioner Dr. Michelle Cohen, Hays County Precinct 2 Commissioner



WTS Heart of Texas is proud to recognize Hays County Commissioner Dr. Michelle Cohen as our 2026 Honorary Member. Her commitment to thoughtful growth, strong infrastructure, and community-centered decision-making reflects the core values of our organization. Commissioner Cohen has built her public service around the belief that fast-growing communities like Hays County need intentional, forward-looking leadership that keeps pace with both opportunity and demand. As growth places pressure on transportation networks, public services, and long-term planning, her work focuses on balancing progress with preservation so today's investments support a more sustainable and accessible future.

Throughout her tenure, Commissioner Cohen has been a steady advocate for improving mobility and infrastructure across Hays County. She recognizes that transportation is about more than moving people from point A to point B; it connects residents to jobs, education, healthcare, and opportunity. Her leadership emphasizes strategic planning, regional collaboration, fiscally responsible investment, and infrastructure decisions that reflect the needs of a diverse and growing population.

Looking ahead, including through her continued campaign for Hays County Judge, Commissioner Cohen has emphasized priorities that align closely with the WTS mission: strengthening infrastructure, supporting smart development, and ensuring public investments are both equitable and impactful. Her vision centers on managing growth responsibly, protecting quality of life, and preparing the region for long-term success.

Commissioner Cohen is deeply committed to transparency, collaboration, and community engagement. She believes the strongest public outcomes come from leaders who listen actively and work in partnership with residents, stakeholders, and regional organizations. During her tenure as Commissioner, she has also shared her perspective as a speaker with many professional development groups, including several WTS Heart of Texas events. This approach has shaped her work on key initiatives and continues to guide her leadership.

For WTS members, particularly women pursuing careers in transportation and public service, Commissioner Cohen's journey serves as a powerful example of impact and possibility. Her leadership demonstrates that thoughtful, values-driven public service can shape not only infrastructure systems, but also the communities they serve.

As we welcome Commissioner Cohen as an Honorary Member, we celebrate her dedication to building stronger, more connected communities in Hays County and beyond.

UPCOMING EVENTS



[REGISTER HERE!](#)



REGISTRATION COMING SOON.

ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP & AWARDS GALA

Building the Yellow Brick Road Together

The Women's Transportation Seminar (WTS) Heart of Texas Chapter brought together our region's transportation community for its 22nd Annual Awards Gala - The Emerald City Ball - on April 25th, 2026 at the Marriott Downtown. The "There's No Place Like Home" celebration honored outstanding contributors to the field, awarded \$25,000 in scholarships, and raised more than \$10,000 through the live auction, all benefiting the WTS Heart of Texas Chapter Foundation and the WTS International Foundation.

Our emcee, Shandon Richardson (TxDOT), guided us through an enchanted and inspirational evening, recognizing several deserving scholarship recipients and industry colleagues. The chapter awarded eight scholarships ranging from \$2,500 to \$5,000 each. Three of those scholarships came through the Friends of WTS Scholarship program, which extends the chapter's reach to high school STEM scholars across Central Texas. This year's Friends of WTS Scholarship sponsors — Garver, Sundt Construction, Stacy Witbeck, and WSP — made it possible to support the next generation of women entering the transportation workforce. The silent auction, fueled by the generosity of numerous community donors, raised over \$10,000 for the chapter's foundations — funds that will go directly toward future scholarship support.

Among this year's sponsorship recipients are two University of Texas at Austin students now spending their summer gaining hands-on experience at Capital Metro Transportation Authority (CapMetro). Riley S., a UT Austin Government and History graduate, believes transit is the core connection behind building cities for everyone. She is working alongside CapMetro's Director of Government Affairs, Celso Baez III, monitoring high-stakes legislative hearings and helping advance transit priorities across Central Texas. Hailee Gustafson, a UT Austin Urban Studies senior and proud Longhorn Band member, is passionate about ensuring every Austinite has access to high-quality public transportation. She is working with Martin Kareithi, CapMetro's Director of Systemwide Accessibility, supporting the agency's commitment to equitable access for every rider. Thank you to CapMetro for their continued partnership and investment in rising professionals!

And finally, none of the evening's magic would have been possible without the chapter's corporate and event sponsors, whose support helped lay the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City Ball. The chapter extends special thanks to all the organizations that helped make the event a reality. For WTS Heart of Texas, the gala is more than a celebration — it is a sustained commitment to cultivating diverse leadership in transportation.

Thank you to all our chapter members, donors, auctioneers, sponsors, award nominees and winners! To see more pictures from the event, visit the WTS HOT Chapter Photo Gallery [here](#).



SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

Helene M. Overly
Memorial Scholarship



Anannya Ghosh Tusti

Bridgette Beato Leadership
Legacy Scholarship



Anna Beliveau

Sharon D. Banks Memorial
Undergraduate Scholarship



Roshni Kandel

Molitoris
Leadership Scholarship



Suvekshya Niroula

TransportationYOU
Scholarship



Laila Ornick

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CHAPTER AWARDS

INNOVATIVE TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS AWARD



Brenda Guerra
Director of Transportation Operations
Central Texas Construction Partnership Program
TxDOT Austin District

ROSA PARKS DIVERSITY LEADERSHIP AWARD



The City of Austin IDEA Committee

HONORABLE RAY LAHOOD MAN OF THE YEAR AWARD



Mike Arellano
Deputy District Engineer
TxDOT Austin District

WOMAN OF THE YEAR AWARD



Anna Martin
Assistant Director
City of Austin

EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR AWARD



Kimley-Horn

MEMBER OF THE YEAR AWARD



Pooja Patel
Transportation Project Manager
Kimley-Horn

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SUMMER INTERN SPONSORSHIP

WTS Heart of Texas Foundation Sponsors Two CapMetro Summer Interns

The WTS Heart of Texas Foundation is the chapter's 501(c)(3) charitable fundraising corporation. Its mission is to encourage and support women in the transportation industry; to provide scholarships to women pursuing or considering careers in transportation; and to support educational and research activities in support of its mission. The WTS HOT Foundation supports the chapter's TransportationYOU program and funds the Friends of WTS Scholarships. The WTS HOT Foundation also sponsors opportunities for women undergraduate and graduate students to work in the transportation industry through fellowships.

This year, we are pleased to be able to partner with CapMetro to sponsor a \$4,400 stipend for two of the interns in the inaugural CapMetro summer internship program, which will run from June 1st to July 31st. The program supports 14 interns (57% are female) across 14 CapMetro divisions. The majority of the interns hail from UT Austin, with others from Texas Tech, Texas A&M, Texas State, Rutgers, and Smith College.

The WTS HOT Foundation is sponsoring Hailee Gustafson, a UT Austin Urban Studies senior with a minor in geography and proud Longhorn Band member. She will graduate from UT Austin in Spring 2027. She is focused on public transportation because she believes that sustainable transportation serves everyone, regardless of income, mobility needs, or stage in life. "It brings people closer to their communities. Ultimately, great public transit makes our cities more equitable, cleaner, and truly accessible," she says. Hailee will work this summer in CapMetro's System Accessibility program, under the leadership of Director of Systemwide Accessibility, Martin Kareithi. The project is to update CapMetro's ADA Transition Plan ESRI GIS dashboard and Capital Projects bus stop improvement data to reflect improvements over the last 3 years and use GIS visualization for storytelling.

Our second sponsored intern is Riley Sandhop, who graduated in May from UT Austin with a BA in Government and History. She chose public transportation as a career because transit is the core connection behind creating cities for everyone. She also loves taking the bus and seeing the sites Austin has to offer. Riley will support the CapMetro Government Affairs team in her internship, under the leadership of Director of Government Affairs, Celso Baez III. By monitoring high-stakes legislative hearings and summarizing complex policy data, the interns will directly support the team's efforts to triangulate actionable intel and advance transit priorities across Central Texas.

We look forward to hearing from these future leaders following the completion of their internship, so stay tuned for that update either in the newsletter or at a future chapter event. We extend special thanks to Adam Rosenfield, Program Manager of Workforce Outreach at CapMetro, for connecting us to this sponsorship opportunity to help support the next generation of transportation leaders.

If you are interested in getting involved with any of the WTS Heart of Texas Foundation's sponsored activities or serving on the Foundation Board, please contact Tonia Norman, Board Chair, at pastpresident@wtshotchapter.org.



Pictured: Riley (left) and Hailee (right)



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