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What about McCarty Lane?

As high school opening nears, rough-riding roadway still untamed

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — When the massive new San Marcos High School opens in six months, the quickest path there from the city's west side will be a narrow, potmarked country road built when everything around it was farm land.

In anticipation of the school's opening, officials in recent years have improved several surrounding roads.

The city and state widened and reconstructed the Old Bastrop Highway and added a traffic light and turn lanes at its intersection with Texas 123. The county widened Centerpoint Lane from Old Bastrop all the way through to Hunter Road, another thoroughfare to the school from the city's population center west of Interstate 35.

Only McCarty Lane east of the interstate remains a rough ride even as development springs up all around it, including a \$71 million hotel and conference center at McCarty and the interstate.

The western segment of the road, between the interstate and Hunter, has been rebuilt with wide shoulders. But the part nearest the school remains uneven and rutted; during a groundbreaking for the hotel last week a shuttle bus twice got stuck in roadside gravel drifts.

"To tell you the truth, it might be better if we didn't use it at all. It's a dangerous road as it is and it's going to be a lot more dangerous" when the school opens, said Dr. Chad Kelly, the high school principal. "I'm not comfortable having our students coming that way."

In many ways, the road's future is tied up in history.

The unimproved segment tracks the planned route for the first three-mile segment of the San Marcos loop, Farm-to-Market Road 110. The project is part of a \$152.8 million package of road improvements caught in limbo with a nearly total turnover of the county's commissioners court in the November election.

A handful of residents who live on the road have been vocal in opposing it as the county's new leadership inches toward making a decision.

Under the agreement, the county will pay for the roads upfront and be reimbursed between \$6.7 million and \$13.3 million a year depending on how many vehicles use the road. If the roads' usage meets projections, the state reimbursement will come to about 85 percent of the project and necessitate only a tax increase somewhere in the neighborhood of 3/4 of a cent per \$100 valuation. Under a worst case scenario, the property tax rate could increase by 11 cents to pay for the projects.

At a recent workshop with Texas Department of Transportation district engineer Bob Daigh, leaders were told they could do the projects they want and drop out of the others. But, he said, every month of delay adds about \$500,000 to the bottom line, inflation that will be footed by the county's taxpayers.

"The state's costs are capped at \$133.3 million. Anything over and above that, the county will have to pay. Every day of delay is driving up the cost for local taxpayers," Daigh said.

The court scheduled another round of workshops on the subject, one for each of the individual road projects. Whatever roads are chosen, it seems likely that commissioners will call a countywide election to ask for approval.

"I personally think all of these roads are really important but because this arrangement is so new to the public and there are so many questions, I think it something we have to do in a way that they have a part in the decision. I do support building all of these roads, including the loop, but I also think we need public approval" to spend that kind of money, said Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe, whose position has been closely watched as the court's most senior member and sometimes swing vote.

As with all bond elections, the devil is in the details. One of the projects, widening Farm-to-Market Road 1626, appears to have broad support; another, widening Ranch Road 12 between San Marcos and Wimberly, is up in the air. Opponents could seek to divide the package into three separate ballot items which could make the loop more vulnerable to residents in other parts of the county that may never use it.

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On the other hand, the court could also decide to sweeten the deal with money to buy open space and parkland. It also might add in money to buy right-of-way for the rest of the loop's 13.5 mile planned route around the city's eastside.

March 20 is the deadline to call an election for the May uniform election date. Ingalsbe said she doubts it can be done by then; Commissioner Will Conley said his goal is to have it on the ballot at the soonest possible election date.

Under any scenario it is impossible that the road will be completed by the high school's August opening. In the meantime, officials are considering stop-gap measures to make it passable for school-bound traffic.

The county is about to start work on adding a center turn lane and shoulders to a half-mile segment of the road that would serve as a feeder from the school to the loop if it is built. The city is also looking at its options, City Manager Dan O'Leary said.

"Our immediate concerns of course are the effects of the new high school and conference center," O'Leary said. "Up until now, we've been waiting to see what the county is going to do. Eventually the council may decide that we have to do something now in anticipation of those projects."

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