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Ranch Road 12

Hays County road bond package expected to go to voters May 12

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

When someone dies on Ranch Road 12, chances are the authorities will call San Marcos resident Wayne Thomason.

"In that last 15 years, we've had 10 calls on traffic accidents on Ranch Road 12 between San Marcos and the junction. Out of those 10 calls, we picked up 13 bodies," Thomason said. "The road is dangerous. It's dangerous now and when there's a lot more traffic on it in the future, it will be even more dangerous."

Thomason, who owns two of the five funeral homes in Hays County, was among more than 100 who turned out Thursday night for a public hearing on plans to widen a 10.3 mile section of the road between the San Marcos city limits and the intersection with Ranch Road 32 outside of Wimberley.

The road is one of a \$155.8 million package of state road improvements that Hays commissioners have said they expect to send to a countywide ballot on May 12. A commissioners workshop was scheduled today, but Pct. 1 Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe was ill, a colleague said, and a vote in her absence is highly unlikely. Monday is the deadline for calling the election.

The changes to Ranch Road 12, estimated to cost as much as \$52.7 million, would add one traffic lane in each direction, with left turn lanes or bays at major intersections.

Originally an unpaved rural route from San Marcos into the Hill Country, the road was paved in the 1930s and, except for periodic resurfacing, has been practically unchanged since the 1960s, Texas Department of Transportation officials said.

Between 1998 and 2001, the Texas Department of Public Safety recorded 62 vehicle-on-vehicle accidents on the segment of the road slated for the improvements. Two people died in those wrecks, and 39 people were injured, nine of whom suffered what the department categorizes as "incapacitating injury." In 2005 and 2006, there have been 29 accidents, though none of them fatal.

While all of the nine people who spoke at the hearing nodded to the road's dangerous reputation, a few residents said they want to see more modest improvements and questioned the project's pricetag.

In an effort to afford the expanded road a "parkway" feeling, plans call for extensive landscaping and adornments, including, as it described in a recent commissioners court presentation, "agrarian" stone walls at intersections, ornamental trees and a median planted with wildflowers.

"It looks like this project has champagne tastes and a champagne budget," Wimberley resident Alice Wightman said. "If we had all the money in the world, it seems like it would be a nice project, but we don't."

Some worry that expanding the narrow, winding road into a major thoroughfare would invite a flood of outsiders to the scenic Hill Country of the Wimberley valley, endangering the environment and disrupting its rural vibe.

Others pointed out the cost estimations amount to about \$5 million a mile. Under the county's agreement with TxDOT, up to 85 percent of the total cost could be reimbursed with state transportation funds, assuming traffic meets projections.

Recalling at least two decades of stop-and-go plans to expand the road, other speakers said the county isn't likely to get a better deal with the state, a stance District Engineer Bob Daigh has reiterated consistently.

First Christian Church member Bill Damron said a succession of leaders have promised improvements to the road since the church relocated there in 1987.

"Shortly after we moved, we spoke with TxDOT as to the need to widen Ranch Road 12 and add turning lanes. ...They told us to be patient, that plans were already in the process," Damron said. "That was 20 years ago."

Opposition from many Wimberley residents led TxDOT to scrap reconstruction plans in the 1990s. County Judge Elizabeth Sumter, a Wimberley resident, was among those who crowded into spirited public

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hearings at the time, although she said recently that she does not remember speaking in opposition to the road.

She has been cryptic on her position since then, saying in an interview two weeks ago that she would "go along with whatever the rest of the court decides is best."

To get it built, officials will need to buy right-of-way from 86 different tracts of land. On the eastern half of the segment, nearly all of the property is held by three landowners, most of it as parts of the Ingram and Freeman ranches.

Turning lanes or bays are planned to improve access to Saddle Ridge Road; Summer Mountain Road; Oakwood Loop and Deer Creek Drive; churches south of Ranch Road 12 and Pioneer trail; Rancho Encino Drive and Falconwood Drive; and County Road 214 and Academy Drive.



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