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Hays Bond

County's hopes for parks, roads hinge on May 12 vote

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — One Thursday night this March, more than 100 people shuffled into a local school cafeteria to hear, and talk about a proposed widening of Ranch Road 12 between San Marcos and the intersection with Ranch Road 32 outside Wimberley.

The few people speaking up who opposed the changes had questions about the project's size, scope and pricetag. But just about everyone agreed that the narrow ribbon of highway, increasingly a major thoroughfare from the interstate to the Hill Country, is a dangerous road.

That weekend, the road claimed its latest life when a man ran his pickup truck off the roadway on a curve and hit a tree.

It was a bleak underscore for supporters of a proposal to sell \$172 million in bonds to add lanes to a 10.3-mile stretch of Ranch Road 12 and a six-mile stretch of Farm-to-Market Road 1626; add shoulders and turn lanes to Texas 21; and build a three-mile segment of Farm-to-Market Road 110, the San Marcos loop. A related project will add turn lanes and possibly shoulders to parts of Texas 21.

"Every moment we hold back, we're subject to lose more lives," Sheriff Allen Bridges told commissioners in supporting the package.

On Ranch Road 12 alone, 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.

Voters will decide whether to approve the debt, which could add one or two cents to the property tax rate, at the polls on May 12. Early voting starts on Monday. Besides the roads package, a second proposal on the ballot would authorize \$30 million to buy parkland and open space for preservation.

Opponents of the roads package are focusing on its bottom line: A little more than \$9 million a mile for about 19 miles of new or rebuilt highway.

"It looks like this project has champagne tastes and a champagne budget. If we had all the money in the world, it seems like it would be a nice project, but we don't," Wimberley resident Alice Wightman said at the Ranch Road 12 hearing.

That number drops to about \$2 million a mile if the county realizes the maximum possible reimbursement from the Texas Department of Transportation under an arrangement called pass-through financing. Depending on how vehicle miles are logged on the improved roads, the state will pay up to \$133.3 million on the \$172 million package.

Supporters say the state reimbursement amounts to the best deal voters — and drivers — are likely to see. The alternative, they say, is footing the bill entirely with local dollars as growth continues to strain transportation infrastructure.

Said Pct. 3 Commissioner Will Conley, "We can sit around hoping for a miracle pot of gold to show up some day or we can make this investment in our community's safety and mobility now. If we don't take this, there isn't likely to be another chance."

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