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Road projects in the fast lane

Eastern loop segment closer to reality

By Brad Rollins
Sports Reporter

San Marcos — A segment of the San Marcos loop and improvements to two other state highways in Hays County are expected to win funding approval today from the Texas Transportation Commission.

Negotiated by Commissioner Will Conley, the \$133.1 million deal would require the county to front the money for the projects, which include widening Ranch Road 12 between here and Wimberley.

The state would cut quarterly checks to the county based on how many cars use the improvements, ultimately reimbursing 80-90 percent of the total price tag, not including interest, officials say.

The agreement opens the door for \$30.4 million of work on the loop, a project that has been under discussion for four decades. A 3.5-mile segment would connect Interstate 35 to Texas 123, following much of the existing route of McCarty Lane.

The road would pass near the Hammons hotel and city conference center and improve access to the new San Marcos High School under construction now on the Old Bastrop Highway, Conley said.

"This is a real shot in the arm to make Hays County roads more efficient and safe," Conley said.

Besides the loop, the agreement includes:

- Widening to five lanes a 10.3 mile stretch of Ranch Road 12 from the San Marcos city limits to Ranch Road 32. The project is expected to cost \$52.7 million.

- Widening to five lanes a six-mile stretch of Farm-to-Market Road 1626 between Ranch Road 2770 to Bliss Spillar Road in Austin. The estimated price tag is \$69.8 million.

The agreement would reimburse the county up to \$133.1 million of the total \$152.9 million price tag at 14 cents for each car that uses the roads after the improvements are completed.

County officials still have to come up with a way to front the money or find someone to do it on their behalf. Conley and County Judge Jim Powers have in the past floated the possibility of asking a private firm to assume most of the cost of building the roads and receive the payments from the state.




All of the improvements were included in a \$47 million bond package approved by county voters in 2002. Only about \$9.2 million of that is uncommitted to a host of county road improvements.

As part of a separate but related agreement, Conley said, the state will also spend \$8 million on safety improvements to Texas 21 between San Marcos and Travis County. That project includes adding left turn lanes and broad shoulders, he said.

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