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Published: June 11, 2007 04:48 pm

Roads: Barton worried county's efforts will be seen in bad light

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

When voters last month declined to authorize bond sales to pay for a road package, Pct. 2 Commissioner Jeff Barton started looking for other ways to pay for widening Farm-to-Market Road 1626, a thoroughfare used by thousands of his constituents to commute to and from Austin.

On May 23, a representative of San Antonio-based Zachry American Infrastructure wrote the commissioner to float the prospect of the county using private capital to get the project done. Barton was interested but leery that political opponents might seize on such an arrangement as a backroom deal with a political contributor.

Barton and Pct. 3 Commissioner Will Conley, both of whom supported the bond package, have been roughed up for weeks over campaign contributions from engineering firms and developers that stood to profit from the road projects. To avoid a conflict, he asked the county purchasing department to draft a request for "letters of intent and interest" from private equity firms like Zachry that might be interested in increasingly common public-private partnerships.

"I was concerned about the perception that this was a 'good of' boy' system backroom deal. In this kind of environment there were going to be suspicions that we cherry picked a company we wanted to deal with," Barton said.

So he was surprised when County Judge Elizabeth Sumter said she opposed spending money for the formalized request process and had asked Zachry representatives herself to conduct "due diligence" and come back to the county with a proposal for how such a deal might work.

"Spending court money to go out for a bid is not a good idea at this point," the judge said. Pct. 4 Commissioner Karen Ford and Pct. 1 Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe both said they're interested in learning more about options for privately funding road projects but voted with Sumter against issuing the request from other companies.

The cost for the proposal process is a couple hundred dollars for advertisements in local newspapers plus, Barton noted wryly, "Nine letters at 41 cents apiece."

Even if officials decides to pursue the proposal or bid request later, Barton said the court is inviting charges that it gave a favored company an inside track. The court's decision against an open solicitation process was particularly to Barton after enduring weeks of charges that he was pushing road construction to enrich campaign contributors.

A filer distributed before the May 12 bond election by Citizens for Responsible Roads PAC focused on \$12,880 in campaign contributions from engineers and developers raised by Barton and \$23,336 raised by Conley.

"Why is the road bond so important to County Commissioners Will Conley and Jeff Barton?" the filer asked. "Because it's all about campaign contributions. Like the old saying goes, 'Follow the money.'"

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Circulation (512) 392-6143



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