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Loop financing

It's too early to talk possible tax costs, mayor says

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — Mayor Susan Narvaiz is trying to head off what she calls speculation about the property tax impact of the city's effort to take on all or part of the cost of building Farm-to-Market Road 110, the eastern loop that has inflamed local politics for months.

City leaders are trying to compel Hays County commissioners to assign to the city a portion of \$133 million reimbursement from the state to cover most of a road package.

That money may never make it to local road projects as officials await word on whether the Texas Department of Transportation will withdraw from the contract after a \$172 million bond package failed last month.

As much as \$17.6 million of the state reimbursement was to pay for roughly 60 percent of FM 110's first three-mile segment, which is estimated in the pass-through financing agreement to cost \$29.3 million.

Using those numbers, resident Amy Kirwin sent a mass e-mail on Monday night supposing that paying off debt on the \$11.7 million difference between the state's maximum reimbursement and the loop segment's estimated pricetag would require an additional 5 cents on the current tax rate of about 47 cents per \$100 in appraised value. That is on top of a five-cent increase Kirwin wrote would be necessary next fiscal year to cover capital improvement projects approved by voters as part of a 2005 bond package.

"There is a question of the amount of tax burden the community can shoulder. The community needs to request that city council look at the different options to finance Loop 110 instead of rushing through one easy option that could be devastating," Kirwin wrote.

Arguing details of the e-mail point-by-point during a city council meeting Tuesday night, Narvaiz refuted what she called "misinformation" but was especially adamant that it is too early to tell how much the first segment of the road might cost the city and how much of that burden would be carried by property owners. With too many things in flux, the mayor said, discussion of the fiscal impact on the city is "unhealthy at this juncture."

"There's been no discussion by council to date about the financing of what may be left over once the commission gets done with deciding about how they want to move forward. In our last meeting we tried to find if the council was interested in asking the county to assign the state dollars and negotiate a partnership with them. It was never an intent by this council to go out and give us those dollars and we're going to figure it out on our own" without a county contribution.

The commissioners court never discussed terms of the city's proposal because it didn't make it on the agenda before they took this week off. They did approve a letter to TxDOT saying they did not want to cancel the agreement but offered no outline for how they would move forward except to say they had formed a citizens committee to vet transportation needs. TxDOT's Austin District Engineer Bob Daigh has not returned phone calls for comment.

Narvaiz said, "The message I get from TxDOT is that we are running out of time. With that in mind, what I've been doing is talking with state officials, people who are involved in roads, to send the message that if they decide ... to take the money away (from Hays County), please allow San Marcos to begin our own negotiations for this \$133 million. ...I want to make sure they don't think that we're not interested."

The council's only discussion of their plan was in a June 5 executive session after the city made an Open Meetings exception for deliberations that, if public, "would have detrimental effect on the city's position in negotiations with a third person." The Daily Record on June 14 requested under the Public Information Act documents or correspondence "assembled by city staff on the budgetary impact and/or financing options of possibly taking on debt for the FM 110 project." The city has not yet provided any such documents, if they exist, but is required under the act to do so within 10 business days of the request.

So adamant that no one talk financing details, Narvaiz told Councilman John Thomaides at one point that he had to limit his comments to "her update" even though the item was posted, broadly, as "discussion regarding FM 110 Loop Project and direction to staff." When Thomaides interjected, she said, "I just want to add that I hope the council will appreciate and respect that we shouldn't speculate on finances."

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Acknowledging that he had forwarded Kirwin's e-mail to his contacts list, Thomaides said, "When we have citizens who feel that it is really important to openly discuss all the aspects of a public project — funding or deal or amount taxpayers might have to pay — I would request we do not attack them. They have every right to speak, to discuss without us from the dais, on TV and through microphone, nitpicking small parts of it."

He added, "It is important that we have open and fair and honest discussion going on out there. ... These kinds of discussion are healthy."

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