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Loop Dilemma

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — Pct. 1 Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe says she will recommend that the county turn over the loop project to the city of San Marcos — and the contractual guarantee of partial funding from the state that comes with it — if the city's voters approve the road again in an election.

The commissioner outlined the position in a June 11 letter to Mayor Susan Narvaiz, who has been pushing to salvage Farm-to-Market Road 110 following last month's bond election. A \$29.3 million three-mile segment of what would eventually be a 13.5 mile loop was included in an agreement with the Texas Department of Transportation to reimburse up to \$133 million of the package's costs if the county would front the money and pay the interest.

"In order to uphold and honor the May 12 election, I will recommend to the court that Hays County assign its pass-through funding agreement regarding Loop 110 and all costs associated with the project to the city of San Marcos, but only if the city leadership will agree to put this financial commitment before its voters and the proposition passes," Ingalsbe wrote.

The first phase of the eastern route around San Marcos would run from Interstate 35 to Texas 123, opening former farm land to development around what is now McCarty Lane. The road would serve a \$72 million hotel and conference center being built at one end and the \$60 million San Marcos High School nearly completed at the other.

Ingalsbe's letter answers one from Narvaiz sent last week after the city council gave her the official go-ahead to pursue the project. Narvaiz wrote, "The city council wishes to express to the Hays County commissioners their desire to negotiate with Hays County an agreement in which the current pass-through financing arrangement the county has with TxDOT would be assigned to the city of San Marcos."

Ingalsbe, however, submitted the item about a half-hour after the deadline for making the week's commissioners court agenda and County Judge Elizabeth Sumter would not waive the guideline. At the meeting, the court voted to notify TxDOT that it does not want to cancel its agreement but did not discuss the proposal from San Marcos.

The city council will publicly talk about the budgetary impact of the loop for the first time at its regular meeting 7 p.m. Tuesday along with Ingalsbe's insistence on another election.

Council member Chris Jones said he opposes another election, saying an eastern loop has already been approved at the ballot box and as part of city, county and regional transportation plans. A majority of San Marcos approved the package in May and \$5 million for the road was approved by Hays County voters as a piece of the 2001 bond package.

"The reality is that there is not time to have another election and [Ingalsbe] should know that better than anyone because she's been in office longer than anyone," council member Chris Jones said. "It's a good political play to say we're disenfranchising voters if we don't hold another election. But it's time for the county to stop playing politics with our city's future."

Council member John Thomaides said he is not philosophically opposed to asking voters to weigh in again on the loop. He is more concerned, he said, about pressing the county to take on some of the estimated \$29.3 million pricetag, which he doubts the city can responsibly assume on its own even with a \$17.6 million reimbursement from TxDOT.

"I hope we can get a better deal than" paying for it entirely with city funds, Thomaides said. "It should truly be a partnership with the state, county and city and I'm going to be looking to the county to pay for a percentage of it. ... I think everyone on the council knows we need to build the loop but frankly I don't see how we're going to be able to afford it by ourselves."

All the talk may be moot if TxDOT officials decide the county is in material breach of its contract. With its June 23 deadline drawing near, the agency's Austin District Engineer Bob Daigh told the Wimberley View this week, "The belief that delaying, saying you're not going forward will somehow preserve these dollars for Hays County is an illusion."

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