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Loop scoop

City wants to salvage road plan

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — San Marcos leaders are sprinting to put together a proposal under which the city will front the \$29.4 million tab for the first segment of the San Marcos loop before state transportation officials walk away from the table and take a promise of repayment with them.

After discussing the project behind closed doors on Tuesday, city council members instructed City Manager Dan O'Leary to formally notify Pct. 1 Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe that the city is willing to take on the project and the debt that comes with it.

The initial three-mile phase of Farm-to-Market Road 110 would start at Interstate 35, following much of the footprint of East McCarty Lane before veering north to intersect with Texas 123.

At one end of what is currently a two-lane country road hugged by barbed wire fences, the San Marcos High School will open in August; at the other end of East McCarty, a \$72 million Embassy Suites and city-owned conference center is scheduled to open in September or October 2008. The full loop would someday stretch 12.5 miles around the city's east side before rejoining the interstate at Yarrington Road.

In the nearly a month since the county's voters rejected a bond package that included money for the loop, San Marcos Mayor Susan Narvaiz has been trying to keep intact a contractual guarantee from the state to reimburse up to \$17.6 million — about 60 percent — of the loop's cost. While the council's only official discussion of the potential deal has been in executive session, Narvaiz has publicly outlined the basics of her plan, most notably during a meeting of local business leaders a week ago at which County Judge Elizabeth Sumter showed up and set off a pointed exchange between the elected leaders.

"We have to try to grab what we have now for Loop 110 or potentially lose it all. ...The county has fought too long and too hard to secure this option of the state dollars," Narvaiz said. "At every level of government, they are telling local government to do more and giving less on everything. When there is this rare opportunity to get state dollars, we have learned that we cannot pass it up."

All of this is happening against the backdrop of a June 23 deadline — 15 days away from today — to notify the Texas Department of Transportation whether the county wants to cancel its agreement with the state. Said Narvaiz, "I don't think there's much of a grace period left with TxDOT."

Eyeing another bond election in November with a new package assembled by a citizens committee, Sumter has made clear that she is willing to play chicken with TxDOT, saying she thinks the agency will come around to fund part of a future package more suited to the county's needs. She and Pct. 4 Commissioner Karen Ford are resisting the loop effort, although Ford has not said if she is willing to consider an arrangement that does not include county funds.

"Is it a hard 30 days? Probably not," Sumter told the San Marcos Chamber of Commerce group.

The mayor responded: "Her interpretation is that she thinks she has time to do something different and she certainly does. The question is, when she gets finished, is the money going to be there to pay for any of it," Narvaiz said.

The conversation continued on Tuesday during a regular commissioners court session. Sometimes speaking directly to Ingalsbe who is all but certain to cast the decisive swing vote, 10 road package opponents said efforts to revive part of the road package is a repudiation of the democratic process.

"I really think the people have spoken and we should abide by their decision. To do anything else is arrogant," said Macel Sullivan, a San Marcos resident and former justice of the peace. The sentiment was echoed by Susan Raybuck, a Wimberley schoolteacher who said, "There cannot be any doubt about the will of the majority of voters."

Such criticism, however, does not seem to speak to Narvaiz's plan which would take the burden off the county's property taxpayers who would have footed the bill to pay back bonds. The county would serve as a conduit between the state and city, council members say, since TxDOT has said the agreement cannot be transferred directly to the city. Called pass-through financing, the arrangement was authorized by

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the Legislature in 2003 as a way for local governments to speed up, and buy into, transportation infrastructure construction that TxDOT maintains cannot be funded in the foreseeable future through traditional sources including state and federal gasoline tax revenue.

Arguments that county voters intended to block the city of San Marcos from pursuing the loop project do not make sense, said council member Gaylord Bose, who was one of only two council members who steadfastly refused to support the hotel and conference center project at another site without voter approval in a bond election. The road package won a majority in San Marcos as well as in Kyle and Buda.

"We want the county to serve as a shell to facilitate this deal between TxDOT and the city of San Marcos. It won't affect taxpayers in the rest of the county at all," said Bose, who previously served as the city's transportation advisory board chair. "This isn't a project we came up with overnight. It's been going on for many, many years. When people learn all the facts, I think it's going to make a big difference in how they look at it."

Taking over the loop project could offer the city more flexibility in paying off the road's initial cost, although officials are declining to discuss particulars until the proposal is pitched to county leaders. Council members could create a tax increment financing zone in the area, property tax revenue from which would be dedicated to paying off city debt on the loop.

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