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Published: July 21, 2007 11:04 pm



Road vote options: Go fast or pass

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — With the clock running on a time to call a November bond election, Hays County's Transportation Advisory Board met for the first time last week, elected a chairman and stared headlong into a huge, largely undefined, undertaking in which tens of millions in state transportation funding is at stake.

The group, made up of four appointees by each commissioners court member, is supposed to recommend whether and when to forward a new bond package to voters — and what roads to include — and also developing a wide-ranging, comprehensive plan for the next few decades of transportation spending.

If officials have any hope of putting together a package in time for the Nov. 13 general election, the court will have to officially call the election by Sept. 4, giving the board little more than a month from their next meeting to assemble a bundle of projects and reconcile those plans with regional and state priorities that, at least in theory, guide what the Texas Department of Transportation is willing to help fund.

The second task — the sweeping plan encompassing highways, commuter rail and other transportation modes — will take at least a year to develop, Sumter told the board.

"One of our first discussions is going to be 'How do we reconcile those two charges.' One is: 'Oh my gosh, we don't have much time to decide.' The other one is 'let's slow down and give a lot of thought to our long-term needs,'" said former Wimberley Mayor Steven Klepfer, a Sumter appointee to the committee who was chosen by secret ballot to chair the board.

The contractual guarantee of up to \$133 million in state funding toward widening Farm-to-Market Road 1626 and Ranch Road 12 and building three miles of the San Marcos loop is on the table after residents voted down selling \$172 million in general obligation bonds to pay for construction and interest on the county's debt.

One viewpoint holds that TxDOT won't wait any longer than a second election in November — if that long — before pulling the money from the county entirely and applying it somewhere else; on the other hand, TxDOT itself is partly on trial with some committee members itching to take the state agency to task for what critics call heavy-handed tactics to get locals to pay for state projects.

Everyone at the meeting last week was cordial even when paper ballots for the powerful chair position were cast between Klepfer, who was a vocal opponent of the bond package, and Sam Cooper, an appointee of pro-bond package Pct. 2 Commissioner Jeff Barton. Cooper was chosen as the panel's vice chair and the group appointed a committee to draft bylaws.

The committee members' brief opportunity to discuss future business broke out into a barrage of questions reflecting members' varied viewpoints which appear to be, not surprisingly, usually reflective of the official who appointed them.

Most substantive discussion, however, was put off until their next session with Klepfer saying the inaugural meeting's agenda allowed only for discussion of procedural issues.

For all the talk of short time, however, the group decided to wait more than two weeks for its next meeting, setting it for 5 p.m. Aug. 2 at the commissioners courtroom in the courthouse.

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