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Published: August 23, 2006 11:23 am   

Loop gets nod

How to pay for it is another question

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — Hays County commissioners cleared the way for \$133.3 million in road projects with what they termed a historic vote, but left open questions about how to pay for them.

The package includes a three-mile leg of the San Marcos loop as well as widening Ranch Road 12 between here and Wimberley and improvements to Texas 21. The county will front the money for the projects.

The state will cut quarterly checks to the county based on how many cars use the improvements, ultimately reimbursing 80-90 percent of the total price tag, not including interest, said Commissioner Will Conley, who negotiated the deal.

Reviewing the projects' recent history starting with a 2002 bond election, Conley said the deal is the best taxpayers can expect during a period of declining transportation dollars and rising construction costs.

"We can sit around hoping for a miracle pot of gold to show up some day or we can make this investment in our community's safety and mobility now," Conley said. "If we don't take this, there isn't likely to be another chance."

Commissioners voted 5-0 to accept the deal and spend the last \$5.5 million — "seed money," Conley called it — from the 2002 package on starting engineering and design on all the projects. They also hired engineering firm Prime Strategies to oversee the package.

The decision deferred what is surely to be the biggest point of disagreement. In January, commissioners will decide whether to issue revenue bonds backed by the promise of payment from the state or go to voters for approval to sell general obligation bonds. Commissioners Susie Carter and Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe said they favor the general obligation route.

The agreement opens the door for \$30.4 million of work on the loop, a project that has been under discussion for four decades. A 3.5-mile segment would connect Interstate 35 to Texas 123, following much of the existing route of McCarty Lane.

The road would pass near the Hammons hotel and city conference center and improve access to the new San Marcos High School under construction now on the Old Bastrop Highway, Conley said.

Officials are seeking right-of-way contributions from Texas State University, which owns a large tract of land south of McCarty, and developer Terry Gilmore who owns 188 acres that will be crossed by the road.

Besides the loop, the agreement includes:

- Widening to five lanes a 10.3 mile stretch of Ranch Road 12 from the San Marcos city limits to Ranch Road 32. The project is expected to cost \$52.7 million.

- Widening to five lanes a six-mile stretch of Farm-to-Market Road 1626 between Ranch Road 2770 to Bliss Spillar Road in Austin. The estimated price tag is \$69.8 million.

The agreement would reimburse the county up to \$133.1 million of the total \$152.9 million price tag at 14 cents for each car that uses the roads after the improvements are completed. If the roads are completed for less than the approved rate, the county can pocket the difference. Conversely, the county will be responsible for any shortfalls stemming from less usage than anticipated.

As part of a separate but related agreement, Conley said, the state will match the county dollar-for-dollar on up to \$8 million on safety improvements to Texas 21 between San Marcos and Travis County. That project includes adding left turn lanes and broad shoulders, he said.

Bob Daigh, the state transportation department's Austin area engineer, said the county won a "truly stunning" appropriation from the transportation commission. Total road construction or expansion expenditures allotted for Travis, Hays and Williamson counties, amounted to \$35 million last year.

"The chances of those mobility dollars ever making it down to Hays County are slim to none. ...There is no other money to do this," Daigh

Photos






Members of the University Democrats supported a county road package Tuesday. (Photo by Brad Rollins) **Brad Rollins/** (Click for larger image)

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said.

A series of speakers spoke in favor of the projects at Tuesday's court meeting. One, Uhlend mayor Daniel Heideman, said his parents took him home from the San Marcos hospital when he was born here in 1945.

"I came home on Highway 21 as it exists today. Nothing has been done on that road in 61 years," Heideman said. "I think it's time that this community do something about that road to make it safer. I don't want my grandkids driving on that road as it is today."

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