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Outer Loop public meetings postponed

By **David Saleh Rauf**

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Consultants hired to conduct the New Braunfels Outer Loop route study have postponed a series of group meetings intended to give the local community a voice in the planning process.

RJ Rivera Associates Inc., a San Antonio-based consulting firm hired by TxDOT to lead the route study, decided to push back technical and community work group meetings for October and November because consultants were still "crunching data" from two October public meetings on the proposed loop.

In all, four separate meetings were postponed. In an e-mail sent out by RJ Rivera to committee members just days before the October meetings no explanation was given for the postponement.

Tentative dates for the meetings have been rescheduled for December and January, said Linda Vela, a public involvement specialist for RJ Rivera.

"We didn't allow ourselves enough time after the October public meetings to digest all the information," Vela said. "In order for those work group meetings to be beneficial and productive, we thought it would be best to postpone them."

The Community Work Group — an ensemble of about 25 people ranging from farmers to representatives from the school districts — is supposed to provide an opportunity for community members to actively participate in the public involvement process. The committee is intended to "ensure that local interests are reflected in the study recommendation."

The Technical Work Group, also made up of about 25 people — comprised mostly of local, state and federal agency representatives, is tasked with ensuring that design standards are followed, technical issues resolved and that the study complies with the National Environmental Policy Act.

In the first three meetings of the Community and Technical Work Groups, committee members chimed in with recommendations to consultants in the following key areas: Identifying constraints for a potential alignment, helping decide what kind of the road the loop could be and which segments of the loop need to be built first. The Community and Technical Work Group meetings are open to the public but only to observe.

The October and November meetings for both groups were never posted on the New Braunfels Outer Loop Web site, nor was there subsequent cancellation. The first set of Community and Technical Work Group meetings were posted, and continue to be posted, under the Web site's public involvement link. Vela said the Web site is expected to be updated within the week.

"We're really playing catch-up right now," Vela said.

Vela said the consulting firm currently is sorting through comments and suggestions given by the more than 400 residents who attended the second round of public meetings in October. A total of 91 comment cards were collected by the firm during those two meetings, according to data given to the Herald-Zeitung. More than 100 comment cards were collected during the first round of public meetings held in June, when more than 500 people showed to hear and see plans for the loop.

Vela said consultants are putting together a summary and analysis of all the comments received and also are meeting with individual stakeholders over the next couple of weeks.

"This is a complicated project and there has to be a time for the consultants to do their work,"

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said Tom Hornseth, Comal County's engineer and representative on the Technical Work Group. "There's a point where you've gathered information and you have to do the engineer and environmental work. The data collecting work has to be put on hold while that is going on."

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