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San Antonio Express-News (TX)

Metro and State News Page 08B

State has loop plan for New Braunfels

Roger Croteau EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

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NEW BRAUNFELS -- Texas transportation officials will unveil a recommended corridor for an outer loop around the city at a public meeting Jan. 31, a full four months ahead of schedule.

State officials said property owners and local officials urged the department to finish the route study sooner because the area is developing so quickly that in another four months there may be new subdivisions planned that would block the corridor planned for the road.

"Any time savings we can get will help a lot of development planning in the county," said Comal County Engineer Tom Hornseth. "The sooner property owners and developers are aware of the rules, the better."

The Texas Department of Transportation started serious planning for a loop around New Braunfels in March 2007. Working with local residents and public officials, the agency developed a 10-mile-wide study area surrounding the city. From there, officials developed several possible route alignments, called the "universe of options." They narrowed that down to a few viable options -- minimizing residential displacement and impacts on schools, and avoiding cemeteries, parks, historic resources and other sensitive areas.

Last month, TxDOT released a "short list" of corridor options by evaluating the crossings at Interstate 35 and the Guadalupe River.

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Now, the recommended option is complete. The corridor is 800 feet wide, double the amount of space actually needed for the road, said TxDOT Area Engineer Greg Malatek.

TxDOT officials said residents consistently asked them to move the study area further north, but the more hilly terrain, the many subdivisions in the area and the further distance from Loop 337 made that unfeasible.

"We are definitely listening to the residents of the New Braunfels area," TxDOT Engineer Judy Friesenhahn said.

The recommended corridor will be presented Jan. 31 at 5:30 p.m. at Canyon High School in New Braunfels.

Next month TxDOT also will make presentations to the New Braunfels and Schertz city councils and the commissioners courts in Guadalupe and Comal counties. Those entities will decide whether to accept the recommended corridor and make it part of their Major Thoroughfare Plans. If they do, they can start preserving the route as the area develops.

If one or more rejects the proposal, TxDOT would work to find an acceptable alternative, Malatek said.

No money is available to actually build the loop and TxDOT officials said funding might not be in place for 25 to 30 years.

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