

## **TxDOT revisiting Outer Loop study**

**By Gerard MacCrossan**

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Texas Department of Transportation officials said they are reopening the New Braunfels Outer Loop study after hearing complaints about the process from the Citizen's Alliance for Smart Expansion.

CASE Founders Dr. Martin and Sharon Levett attended the state's Sunset Commission hearing in July and testified about problems they perceived with the proposed Outer Loop planning process. TxDOT Assistant Executive Director David Casteel requested a meeting with the Levetts, which prompted the study's reopening.

"I think the outcome was very good, that they are going to take another look at the alignment," Sharon Levett said Tuesday. "One of the things I'm pleased with is they are going to have the study match up with the goals that Chairwoman (Deidre) Delisi set. That was a positive outcome of the meeting."

In May, Delisi announced that the five-member Texas Transportation Commission had affirmed two additional principles of road planning that insist TxDOT considers using existing right-of-way for road expansion, and that when practical, private property would not be divided by a new road.

TxDOT's Clay Smith, director of Transportation Planning and Development in the San Antonio District, which includes Comal County, said Thursday that TxDOT sought the meeting with Martin Levett because of the statements he made to the Sunset Commission.

"Through the conversation Dr. Levett expressed some concerns in the process and some of our findings and data we had on the Outer Loop study," Smith said. "We said we'd go back and look at the data."

Smith reiterated the study was never intended to be the complete closure to the environmental document.

"It was to provide a corridor to be used by the city of New Braunfels and Comal County knowing where it would make sense should developers come in. It was to be part of their thoroughfare plan," he said.

Sharon Levett said there are inconsistencies in the study, including different standards used by consultants Kennedy Consulting and R.J. Rivera and Associates on the East and West sides of the study area. The consultants used different standards to determine whether a property was affected by the proposed right-of-way. Kennedy said a property was affected if the 800-foot right-of-way touched any part of the property; Rivera's definition required a structure to be in the right-of-way.

Smith said the route was devised using aerial photography and never was intended to involve the thoroughness of a project that was being readied for implementation.

“We’ll go back and look to see if we missed some homes,” Smith said. “We believe our consultant did it correctly, but according to Dr. Levett he feels there was something missed. He feels our matrix we used in evaluating the alignment — as you weigh which one has the least impact — wasn't weighted correctly.”

Smith said TxDOT will hire the consultants back to review the data. Smith was unable to provide information Friday concerning how much already has been spent on the Outer Loop study, or how much the additional work would cost. He said that he would research the information but hadn't provided a response by press time Tuesday.

According to Sharon Levett, information she received from TxDOT indicated \$3.2 million was spent so far.

Smith and Levett said the TxDOT and CASE representatives would meet again after the review was complete.

“We’re hoping to do it in the next 30 to 45 days,” Smith said. “It shouldn’t take too long to go back through and evaluate.”