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Outer Loop Task Force takes first step

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The Herald-Zeitung

Published April 3, 2009

More than 200 residents packed the New Braunfels Civic Convention Center Thursday for the first meeting of the Outer Loop Task Force.

Organized by the Texas Department of Transportation, the group — made up of more than 20 landowners, government officials and other interested parties — is charged with evaluating TxDOT's plans for a 40-mile loop that could one day encircle New Braunfels.

TxDOT formed the group after residents had claimed that the state made numerous errors while conducting its initial plans for the outer loop. As a result, the task force will be looking into the processes used by TxDOT to design and plan for the much-debated potential highway.

“There was a lot of concern about what was initially proposed, and it's important to us that we're transparent and accountable to our citizens,” said Mario Medina, TxDOT's San Antonio District Engineer. “This (task force) is, I think, the best way to do that. We'll provide the information, and hopefully now we can build a consensus and have the community agree on how we can move forward.”

The outer loop has been planned for decades, first drawn up by the city of New Braunfels as a way to handle future growth in 1964. It also is already on the city's current thoroughfare plan, which was released in 2005. TxDOT's latest design for the loop was unveiled in 2007.

Some residents have campaigned against its construction since that unveiling, most of whom are in the path of the proposed highway. They continued to do so during a short public comment period Thursday — claiming the loop is too large for this area, could invite additional urban development and potentially be a threat to the environment and numerous ranches and farms that local families have owned for generations.

“It could be a threat to a lot of things we hold dear,” said area resident David Schroeder.

Funding for the outer loop is not currently available through the state or federal government, and County Judge Danny Scheel told the large crowd that it may not be built for 20 to 30 years.

“It won't get done in my lifetime,” Scheel said. “But I won't sit back and do nothing and leave our area in a terrible situation when it comes to transportation.”

Although well-attended, the task force spent the majority of its first meeting laying out ground rules and parliamentary procedures the body will abide by as it moves forward.

The task force is scheduled to meet on the third Monday of each month until December.

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