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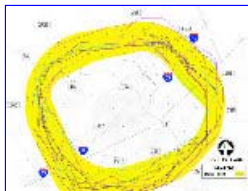
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Photo by Miranda Laine

Karen Dietz leans over the shoulder of her neighbor, Julia Pantermuehl, to point out the area where they live on one of the outer loop maps during Thursday's TXDOT public meeting. Pantermuehl has lived on the same ranch for 30 years and is concerned for the future of young ranchers.



New Braunfels Outer Loop map

Debate over Outer Loop continues

By [David Saleh Rauf](#)

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The proposed 40-mile loop around the city of New Braunfels will help facilitate growth and ease traffic on already congested city and county roads. State, county and city officials should be praised for their good management and efforts in planning for the future of one of the fastest growing regions in the state.

Or the same loop will swallow up hundreds of acres of farm land and private property, displacing families and derailing many local farmers and ranchers in the process. The loop also will attract unnecessary growth in a town that many moved to in the first place to get away from the hustle and bustle of big city life.

Those are the mixed sentiments that have culminated over the past three and a half months as nearly 1,000 local residents have attended four public meetings since June for what could be one of the largest road projects Comal and Guadalupe counties have ever seen.

On Thursday, more than 300 people packed into New Braunfels High School cafeteria for the second of two scheduled meetings this month intended to give those in favor and those who oppose the loop a glimpse of what may be to come.

"I know there's a lot of emotions when land has to be acquired for public use," said John Whipple, who owns land on Hoffmann Lane and Farm-to-Market 1102 that could be affected by right of way acquisition needed to build the loop. "I hope it doesn't impact our property, but I think it's inevitable that there will be an outer loop. It's real a positive thing."

But for land owners like Justin Voges, whose 200-acre farm off Hoffmann Lane has been in his family for 70 years, the loop touches a little too close to home. Consultants hired by the Texas Department of Transportation have identified multiple potential routes that intersect each other, creating hundreds of "alternatives" and options. Voges' farm, however, is right in the middle of all four potential corridors identified by consultants.

"It's not an alternative route for me," Voges said. "As it is right now it's destroying our family ranch."

TxDOT officials Thursday evening reinforced the same position they have assumed since the announcement of the outer loop route study: Nothing is etched in stone in terms of whose land will be traversed by the loop, nobody is going out and making right of way acquisitions and the process currently being undertaken is just a means to identifying a possible corridor so that future development doesn't snatch up land for a possible route.

"What were doing tonight is simply a tool for the local planning authorities," said area TxDOT engineer Greg Malatek. "This is

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strictly a study.”

The loop would require at least two new crossings over the Guadalupe River and could connect to Interstate 35 on the north side of New Braunfels and to I-35 on the south side of the city. It could intersect along Interstate 35 and Kohlenberg and Conrad roads and could also intersect with FM1101, FM 1102, FM 1863 and Texas 46.

However, the New Braunfels Outer Loop is an unfunded project being proposed by a state transportation agency that recently said it has no money to build new roads. The possibility that the loop will be tolled remains high as the TxDOT officials say they only have money to maintain existing roads.

Construction for most of the loop still is about 20 years out or until TxDOT can identify money to build it. Individual segments of the loop, however, could be built within the next five to 10 years, consultants say. One TxDOT official Thursday even said that those independent segments might be the only portions of the loop ever constructed based on money and necessity, leaving the possibility open that the entire 40-mile loop may never come to fruition as a whole.

Consultants Thursday also unveiled for the first time an environmental constraint map that labeled all the identified constraints so far. TxDOT officials say the portion of the loop west of I-35 contains a large amount of natural resources — possible Golden-cheeked Warbler habitat, Edwards Aquifer Recharge zones, caves and bluffs — that will make plotting a corridor for the loop difficult. The philosophy consultants and TxDOT officials are pursuing is one of “avoid, minimize and mitigate” when necessary in terms of identified constraints. If construction of the loop is perceived to cause too much impact to the region, TxDOT official risk losing the possibility of snagging federal funds.

Some who attended Thursday’s meeting did not question the need for the loop. Rather they questioned it’s placement in light of what officials call planning for the future.

Jerry Jennigan, who owns land on Elm Creek Rd and moved from Houston to escape the big city life, said he believes the loop is too close to the city and should be placed further out.

“If you’re thinking future why stay so close,” he asked. Jennigan’s thoughts on the placement of the loop were reinforced by other who attended.

Thursday’s meeting —in which dozens of people leaned over desks and pointed, plotted and marked colorful maps with possible corridors — drew it’s fair share of passionate remarks as residents sounded off on consultants attending the seven different stations.

“It’s going to devastate everything in it’s path,” Dorothy Mercer, who owns a 35-acre farm on Alligator Creek, said as she pointed to a map and spiritedly questioned the need for the loop. “It makes me feel sick.”

Other’s like 92-year-old Julia Pantermuehl, who recalls making the drive from Seguin to New Braunfels on dirt roads in 1939, were a bit more subdued Thursday night. Pantermuehl, who lives on a 500-acre farm off FM 306 and Hoffmann Lane, sat back in her wheelchair and calmly expressed her support for the loop, but said she fear s for the future of farming and ranching in the region.

“For me its not going to be that long but I feel for the young people ranching,” she said. “We want to keep our goats and our cattle on the ranch.”

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