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New Braunfels is planning anew

[By Colin McDonald](#)- Express-News

If there is one thing New Braunfels excels at, it's making plans. However, implementation is a much slower process.

For decades, city leaders — along with those from Comal County and the chamber of commerce — have talked about, commissioned studies on and held public meetings to discuss ideas about New Braunfels' downtown and where to build an outer highway loop.

The plans were made. The plans gathered dust. Meanwhile, subdivisions and strip development stores sprawled out to the Hill Country and along Interstate 35 as exemptions were granted and developers went into the county.

The downtown storefronts started to go dark.

Now new plans are being made again.

Fearing that rapid development over the past decade will continue unabated, the downtown charm to be lost forever, the state has spent more than \$3.2 million over the past two years to recommend where an outer loop should be built. And the city has commissioned a Downtown Implementation Plan for \$280,000.

“This city has been so decimated by suburbia, I think it is amazing it still exists,” said Neal Payton of Torti Gallas and Partners, which won a contract to create the downtown master plan.

Payton and his team of a dozen consultants and subcontractors read more than 42 plans dating to the 1990s as they prepared to gather public input for the plan they will create. Even with that review, they were unaware that the Texas Department of Transportation was planning the corridor for a loop around the city.

Coincidentally, both groups held public meetings recently next door to each other at the city's civic center on the same night.

The loop is well outside the focus area of the downtown plan, and Payton argues that it can't do any more harm to the commercial center than the construction of Interstate 35 and outlying shopping centers already have.

But it is still a bit unnerving, he and his transportation consultant said. As they have in San Antonio and

other Sun Belt cities, loops are notorious for pulling the commercial viability out of downtowns and leaving them to either become tourist attractions at best or empty storefronts.

Others do not see a problem.

“There are some of us who think we can have both,” County Commissioner Jan Kennady said of having a loop and a viable downtown.

Kennady served as mayor of New Braunfels in the 1990s during some of the city's most rapid growth. She said she thinks the entire area within the 40-mile loop will eventually be developed.

The Texas General Land Office placed that bet in 2005 when it started to buy up 1,200 acres on the city's eastern boundary along I-35 to develop into a business park and then sell to benefit the Texas Permanent School Fund.

The manager for the property, Rick Sheldon, said he and others then met with the city and TxDOT to encourage the outer loop to go through the two parcels, as it would improve their marketability.

“Everybody knows that putting those roads in leads to the development,” said Annalisa Peace, executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance.

Peace became involved with the planning of the outer loop when she saw that half the proposed corridor goes over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality says the Edwards is the most economically productive and most ecologically vulnerable aquifer in the state.

“You are setting up the same problems we have out on 1604,” Peace said.

Some of the staunchest opponents to the loop are the ones driving the demand for it. They have bought small parcels of land in the county that contribute to the congestion of the roads and drive up the cost of land, Peace admitted.

“This is a constant problem for us,” she said, as many of the nonprofit group's most dedicated and effective volunteers live in homes above the aquifer.

Peace said it is why the city and county government need to have better controls and guides for development.

Mayor Bruce Boyer said he believes that New Braunfels can have development with a growing economy and avoid the disconnected, unwalkable subdivisions and box stores that have sprung up along Loop 1604. The city just has to have and enforce strong zoning and building codes.

“Is it because they did not do proper land control, or is it because they built a loop?” he asked of the cause of San Antonio's sprawl.

Not following San Antonio's lead will not be easy. Just changing rules for how people can float down the Guadalupe River was a difficult and lengthy process, several people said, and the city will be dealing with private property rights.

But the debate may need to happen. Boyer points to Austin and what he describes as the “helter-skelter” development resulting from the city deciding to not build a loop and subsequent traffic congestion.

“I have not seen anything that is preferable to a loop,” he said.

Now the question remains: Will the city accept TxDOT's proposal and follow the plan?

Planning for New Braunfels growth



- 1 1964: WITH A POPULATION NEAR 16,000**, the city of New Braunfels' Master plan designated an outer loop. The easement was not enforced and developers were allowed to build on the corridor so the loop was never completed.
- 2 2005 AND 2006: THE TEXAS GENERAL LAND OFFICE** invests in 1,200 acres along Interstate 35 outside the city and lobbies New Braunfels to have an outer loop pass near or through the property.
- 3 2008: TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION** spends \$3.2 million to identify a corridor for an outer loop, half of which is over the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone. The city's master plan identified four similar corridors beginning in 1999 as the city's population grew from 36,000 in 2000 to more than 50,000 in 2007.
- 4 2009: NEW BRAUNFELS STARTS** holding meetings for a Downtown Implementation Plan.

Sources: Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, City of New Braunfels, Texas General Land Office, U.S. Census.

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