

Learning about the Loop

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Emotions ran high Wednesday night at the New Braunfels Civic Center during a town hall-style meeting where city and county officials led discussions about the proposed New Braunfels Outer Loop.

About 400 people listened intently as Texas Department of Transportation Area Engineer Greg Malatek gave a presentation on the Outer Loop study and as city and council officials answered presubmitted questions.

When the floor was open for the public to speak, about 30 people lined up to address officials, that included city council members and county commissioners.

Bryanna Newton, 10, stood at the lectern and read a statement explaining that her family will lose the 40 acres passed down from her great-grandparents if the recommended corridor is built.

Bryanna and her 7-year-old sister, Brishen, then read aloud an old Native American proverb that Bryanna said sums up their feelings on the loop, which drew standing ovations from some and applause from everyone in the crowd.

“Only when the last tree is cut, only when the last river is polluted, only when the last fish is caught will they realize that you can’t eat money,” the girls read.

The proposal involves building a 40-mile loop around the City of New Braunfels encompassing portions of Comal and Guadalupe counties aimed at alleviating traffic caused by area growth.

The proposal has garnered mixed sentiment at various public meetings held by TxDOT since the proposal’s unveiling last June.

The final recommended corridor was presented at a public meeting on Jan. 31.

Most residents who spoke out were, like the girls, concerned about the the environmental impact the loop could have. Many, including New Braunfels resident Frank Teas, also questioned the impact it could have on the city’s heritage and downtown.

Teas said his concern is that an isolated picture of the loop is being looked at rather than the larger picture of what this community and the resident’s lives in Comal and Guadalupe counties are all about.

In regards to downtown, Mayor Bruce Boyer said the city council will continue to ensure that the area will be the focal point and icon of the community.

Many members of the Citizens Alliance for Smart Expansion, a group of area residents that conduct weekly meetings to discuss concerns over the Outer Loop, were present and shared their thoughts on the issue.

Boyer addressed one of the presubmitted questions concerning whether the city was going to start acquiring land for the right-of-way.

“As property is sold and developed we have to have a planning tool in place to acquire the land,” Boyer said. “We’re not about to go out and start using tax dollars to acquire land for the Outer Loop.”

Boyer stressed again and again that the Outer Loop study was simply a planning tool and that no final decisions had been made.

“The primary reason we’re looking at this now is to try and plan for the future,” Boyer said. “That’s the process we’re engaged in now. This is not the last meeting we’re going to have on this. This is not something that just has come up. This has evolved from a lot of different circumstances and will most likely continue to evolve,” he said.

Comal County Judge Danny Scheel, said the building of the loop is “people-driven.”

“As long as those plots aren’t sold then the segments may not even be built,” Scheel said.

The question of whether the loop would be tolled came up several times.

Scheel said that there are no toll roads at this time in the county, but it can’t be known what will happen 10 or 20 years from now.

Scheel also said that the county has to look ahead to future growth, adding that the current population of Comal County is about 108,000, while the projected growth for 2040 is 250,000.

“As city and county officials, I think it’s our duty to take these figures into consideration,” Scheel said.

“We can’t just bury our heads in the sand and see if these people show up. We need to prepare because once the people get here, it will be impossible to keep up with the infrastructure,” he said.

Annalisa Peace of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, recommended that an environmental impact study on the land in the recommended corridor be considered, which drew applause from the audience.

“You need to plan this wisely because it does transverse some environmental areas,” she

said. "You'll be able to plan even better for what's going to go on in those areas."

Boyer said since the loop is only a planning tool, an environmental study isn't necessary, even if the city could afford to have one done.

Malatek said if federal or state funds were secured for any parts of the project, an environmental study would be done then.

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