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## Outer Loop options narrowed

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**CIBOLO —** In June, the Texas Department of Transportation and a group of consultants unveiled preliminary plans for a proposed 40-mile loop around portions of Comal and Guadalupe counties.

During the first two public meetings about the New Braunfels Outer Loop, more than 500 residents and concerned property owners were shown a map of the city and surrounding area encircled by a yellow band. The yellow band represented a two-to-five mile wide study area, but it only gave property owners a vague idea of where the loop might be constructed. No specific corridors or possible constraints had yet been identified.

Fast-forward three months, and now, not only have hundreds of corridors, with thousands of possible combinations, been identified, but officials working on the project say they have a "universe of options" at their disposal to solidify a final route for the loop. From those hundreds of identified corridors, engineers have whittled the project down to a few dozen possible routes that still have "hundreds of possible combinations," a consultant working on the project said Tuesday.

"We refined it down to a manageable number by doing in-depth studies," Kevin Kennedy, a physical engineer for Kennedy Consulting and a project manager for the outer loop project east of Interstate-35.

On Tuesday, about 150 people filed into Byron P. Steele II High School off Farm-to-Market 1103 for the second round of outer loop public meetings. For the first time, residents overwhelmed by increasing traffic and property owners concerned the loop will swallow up their land were presented with what one TxDOT official called a "huge spaghetti bowl" of possible routes, each one diagrammed on what used to be the empty yellow band.

The project is currently unfunded. TxDOT officials and consultants working on the project said money to build the road could come from federal, state or local sources. Kennedy said Tuesday the road also could be tolled to help pay for construction.

Consultants expect to have an 800-foot wide corridor identified for the loop by this summer. 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. The outer loop, which will be built in segments, could take up to 30 years to build, but certain "pieces" could be constructed within five-to-10

years, Kennedy said. No stand-alone segments of the loop have yet been identified for construction. Officials are working to secure right-of-way for the loop to ensure that homes, schools and businesses are not in the road's path.

For the first time Tuesday, consultants also made a recommendation as to what type of road the loop should be. Officials had been determining whether to build the road as a major arterial, parkway or a freeway. The team of consultants determined that a major arterial, similar to I-35, would be the best option for the loop.

"We, as a study team, and TxDOT also feel it should be an expressway," Kennedy said. "As far as bang for the buck, it's a better value with respect to the needs of the project."

An expressway would cost more money to build and would require officials to purchase more right-of-way -- anywhere from 300-to-450 feet -- from adjacent property owners. Officials Tuesday stressed the project is still in the preliminary stages and that property acquisition has not yet been finalized.

"We're not doing any thing more than identifying where this project should go," Kennedy said. Around 150 people attended Tuesday's meeting. Reactions to the newly-identified routes were mixed.

Beverly Maddox, who lives in a subdivision off Texas 46, said she is in favor of a loop being built that could help alleviate traffic and give her easier access to I-35.

"I think it's great," she said. "I just wish it was going to be done in my lifetime."

But Phillip Schulze, who said he was relieved to find out his house by Lake Dunlap is no longer in one of the identified routes, is ardently opposed to the loop.

"It's violating people's property rights and facilitating unnecessary growth. We have plenty of roads already," Schulze said. "I hope they never build it."

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