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Debate on loop for New Braunfels continues

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

NEW BRAUNFELS — More than 300 ranchers, farmers, homeowners, politicians, retirees and business owners filled the Civic Center Thursday night to find out the next step in the planning of a 40-mile highway around the city.

The answer was a schedule of consensus-building meetings lasting till Christmas.

For the past year, consultants for the Texas Department of Transportation have worked to set an 800-foot-wide, 40-mile-long corridor around New Braunfels. The plan was completed early, but because of citizen complaints and concerns, a task force was formed to go over the procedures used. Its first meeting was Thursday.

“We don't believe anything was incorrect,” said Jonathan Bean, interim transportation planning director for TxDOT's San Antonio district.

Bean said the task force will not be able to change the plan but will make recommendations. That angers members of the Citizens Alliance for Smart Expansion. Many of them live in or near the proposed corridor.

The group questions if the loop is needed, why it can't be attached to existing roads, what the impact of construction over the Edwards Aquifer would be and how the new highway would change the already sprawling city.

“They are doing it rather backwards,” Sharon Levett, a member of CASE who sits on the task force. “They have never explored an alternative.”

But the most high-ranking politician in the county disagrees.

“Since 1995 we have been asking TxDOT to do a study for us to set an alignment for the outer loop,” Comal County Judge Danny Scheel said.

Although the city never formally asked TxDOT for the study, its planners have called for some sort of outer loop since 1964, both Bean and Scheel said.

New Braunfels is one of the fastest-growing cities in the state and has never secured the public easements for the previously proposed smaller loops or to stop developers from building subdivisions on them.

“When I first started, they were going to put it right down my driveway,” Scheel said. “And I was all for it. But the first thing we knew, there was a subdivision behind me.”

That caused the loop to be pushed out farther, he said. Then more subdivisions were allowed and the loop was pushed out farther still.

The judge envisions a loop like Loop 1604 in San Antonio.

“Where would San Antonio be if someone had not set aside the property for 1604?” he said.

There is no current funding marked for the construction of the loop and Scheel, 60, believes he will be dead before construction starts.

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