

Alamo Group of the Sierra Club
Aquifer Guardians in Urban Areas
Austin Regional Sierra Club
Bexar Audubon Society
Bexar Green Party
Cibolo Nature Center
Environmental Stewardship
Committees of the Episcopal
Church of Reconciliation &
Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Environment Texas
First Universalist Unitarian Church
of San Antonio
Friends of Canyon Lake
Fuerza Unida
Government Canyon Natural
History Association
Hays Community Action Network
Helotes Heritage Association
Hill Country Planning Association
Guardians of Lick Creek
Kendall County Well Owners
Association
Kinney County Ground Zero
Medina County Environmental
Action Association
Northwest Interstate Coalition of
Neighborhoods
Preserve Our Water-Blanco County
San Antonio Conservation Society
San Geronimo Valley Alliance
San Geronimo Watershed Alliance
San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance
San Marcos River Foundation
Santuario Sisterfarm
Save Barton Creek Association
Save Our Springs Alliance
Scenic Loop/Boerne Stage Alliance
Sisters of the Divine Providence
Smart Growth San Antonio
SEED Coalition
Texas Water Alliance
Travis County Green Party
West Texas Springs Alliance
Wimberley Valley Watershed
Association

24 March 2008

Councilman Steven Digges
New Braunfels Council District 6
sdigges@nbtexas.org
830.221.4000 x4506

Re: Comments on Proposed Corridor for New Braunfels Outer Loop

Dear Councilman Digges,

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA). GEAA is a non-profit coalition of organizations across the Edwards Aquifer united to preserve the water, wildlife, scenic beauty, and cultural heritage of the Edwards Aquifer and the Texas hill country.

As part of the New Braunfels Outer Loop study process, we submitted comments to TxDOT c/o RJ Rivera Associates, Inc. on July 7 of last year outlining some general environmental considerations. We reiterate these past comments and urge early incorporation of environmental constraints, namely that 1) the western and northern portions run through the highly-sensitive Edwards Aquifer recharge zone and will likely cross endangered karst invertebrate habitat (see 65 Fed. Reg. 81419 for listing), and 2) the northern portion, and possibly other portions, run through prime habitat of the endangered Golden-cheeked warbler (see 55 Fed Reg. 53153 for listing, and Golden-cheeked warbler recovery plan).

Having pointed out these crucial environmental characteristics of the areas west and north of New Braunfels, we are disappointed that there has not been more of an effort to incorporate these constraints early on in the process. From the most recent press release it appears that the options shown at the second public meeting were developed based on the following goals: minimize residential displacement; minimize impacts to schools; avoid cemeteries and prehistoric burial sites; avoid impacts to parks/recreational facilities; avoid impacts to historic resources; avoid impacts to landfill.

We think it is an oversight to not include factors such as “minimize impacts to groundwater and wells;” “minimize impacts to endangered species habitat, including sensitive karst zones and woodlands for the Golden-cheeked warbler and Black-capped vireo;” and “minimize impacts to critical environmental features, such as streams, bluffs, and recharge features.” Again, we urge early incorporation of these factors, and early coordination with state and federal environmental agencies and local government. Extensive mapping and surveying of environmental constraints such as warbler habitat, wells, sensitive caves and recharge features should be a priority of this planning process, and would make a much better project while also providing invaluable information to the City of New Braunfels for other future planning.

We also note that TxDOT is under an obligation to “proactively address environmental issues,” 43 Tex. Admin. Code § 2.4(4)(A), and to “ensure that a systematic, interdisciplinary, and public approach is used to evaluate social, economic, and environmental impacts.” *Id.* § 2.4(3)(B). Indeed, regulations regarding the development of any road project stress the need for *early* coordination with the public up to and including the inception of a proposal. *See* 23 C.F.R. § 771.111(a), (h)(2) (“procedures must provide for: . . . (ii) Early and continuing opportunities during project development for the public to be involved in the identification of social, economic, and environmental impacts.”); *see also* 43 Tex. Admin. Code § 2.43(b), (c)(3) (“Public meetings will be held: (A) as early as the department determines feasible to assure public input into project planning; (B) to provide a free exchange of project views and concerns; (C) during project planning and development in order to keep the public informed”).

With respect to the public process for the New Braunfels Outer Loop Study, we also have concerns and feel that the process could be improved. We have heard from some landowners affected by the corridor who feel that they were left out during the crucial final stages, not able to give input, and possibly not even properly notified. It is also clear that there was no public meeting between the short list stage and the final corridor recommendation. Certainly those crucial final steps in the process call for greater collaboration with the public and not less.

In light of the above concerns, we ask that the New Braunfels Outer Loop Study slow down to reassess whether environmental constraints and the views of affected landowners have been adequately incorporated into the final corridor recommendation. We think that these are areas that can be improved on, and we look forward to working with TxDOT, the City of New Braunfels, and RJ Rivera Associates on this effort.

Thank you for your consideration, and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



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