

**Williamson County Road Bond Program
SH 29 Corridor Study
Frequently Asked Questions**



In our ongoing effort to keep the citizens of Williamson County informed of the SH 29 Corridor Study, the following document is an update of the Frequently-Asked-Questions. These questions were generated through feedback at the open houses in May 2008, as well as input the County has received from citizens through its road bond information phone line and email address.

We often are asked why we are doing this. We believe studying the corridor now for right-of-way preservation prepares us for the future in a smart and prudent way. Our County is faced with some very tough decisions as we plan to accommodate the area's projected growth.

From 2000 to 2007, Williamson County was the second fastest growing county in Texas and thirteenth in the U.S. That rate of growth continues today.

Here are just a few additional facts regarding population projections Williamson County needs to deal with in a proactive manner.

- Williamson County's population is estimated to reach 548,770 in 10 years
- By 2030, Central Texas' population is expected to double again to 2.75 million
- State Data Center estimates Williamson County's population will be 1,104,899 by 2030
- Roadway usage in Central Texas is projected to increase 139 percent by 2030

These are just some of the reasons the County has chosen to move forward with the SH 29 Corridor Study now. Please continue to participate in the process and share your input – it is an important factor in our decision-making process.

Sincerely,

Commissioner Valerie Covey and Commissioner Cynthia Long

Can you build overpasses in Liberty Hill instead of widening the road and building additional lanes?

Overpasses can be built, but they would still require widening the road in the area. In order to provide access to the road that is overpassed (such as FM 1869), entrance and exit roadways must be maintained. Otherwise, once a person got on SH 29, he or she would not be able to exit to access the local streets. That solution would work for people traveling through Liberty Hill, but local citizens and those that wanted to access local businesses on intersecting roads would not be able to do so.

Also, if overpasses were contemplated in Liberty Hill, it would be necessary to account for all existing stoplights, as well as any potential, future ones.

Have you evaluated greenfield sites (new location roadways) from D.B. Wood Road to Ronald Reagan Blvd? If not, why?

A preliminary analysis of alternatives to the existing SH 29 alignment was reviewed. It was determined that a new location roadway (greenfield site) would dramatically increase the project's potential impacts on endangered species.

SH 29 runs through several environmentally sensitive areas. The existing section of the roadway is located within the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone, which is not just an issue for Austin but has federal implications because it is home to karst (cave) habitat for federally endangered species. The same concern applies to federally endangered bird species, such as the golden-cheeked warbler. While existing SH 29 also crosses this habitat, many of the caves have already been affected by the existing roadway.

The bottom line is that the environmental impacts of pursuing a greenfield site would be significant, especially east of Ronald Reagan Blvd., because of the presence of karst habitat and the proximity to the San Gabriel River. For more information, please visit <http://www.wilcogov.org/CountyDepartments/RoadBondProgram/tabid/660/Default.aspx>

The SH 29 Corridor Study is based on 2003 gas usage. Is this realistic for the future? Do gasoline prices change the traffic count predictions?

Gasoline prices do impact traffic count forecasts, but not to a great extent. Future crude oil prices, and indirectly gas prices, are difficult to predict. Industry analysts' predictions of short-term, future oil prices range from \$100 to \$200 a barrel. However, since this planning study encompasses forecasts up to 30 years, adjustments for gas prices were not included in the traffic count calculations.

The number of cars on the road has not dropped significantly, despite gas prices approaching \$4 per gallon and diesel approaching \$5 per gallon. However, what has changed are the types of cars people are buying, with a clear shift toward smaller, more fuel-efficient cars instead of SUV's and trucks. Since the overall number of vehicles on the road is still expected to increase significantly, we will still need to upgrade the highway to reduce future traffic congestion.

Why is 400 feet required? Why can't you build something much narrower?

400 feet is considered to be the ideal footprint for this roadway in order to balance the competing goals of minimizing construction and right-of-way (ROW) costs; although 400 feet is not required to build a freeway section with frontage roads. A wider roadway of “X” number of lanes costs much less to construct than a narrower roadway of “X” lanes.

Another consequence of a considerably narrower section is the built-in limitations for future generations that may consider using part of the ROW for multimodal transportation, such as rail. Finally, significantly narrowing the section at any one point introduces a permanent bottleneck that will also negatively affect future widening options. An example of this scenario is demonstrated by the elevated section of IH-35 near downtown Austin, where the 200-foot ROW required an expensive and undesirable elevated solution still in place today.

During the open houses, we heard mention that some of the alternatives could have “fatal flaws” associated with them, which would classify them as not viable options. What are some of these fatal flaws?

The engineering firm conducting the study will eliminate routes based on the severity of environmental impacts. When we develop routes, we attempt to avoid and/or minimize impacts to the natural and human environments.

There are certain resources where impacts are very difficult to mitigate, including cemeteries, parks and properties that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). With cemeteries, you have to obtain permission from every living heir before you can move a grave; therefore, cemeteries are considered fatal flaws to project development. Impacts to parks and NRHP eligible properties fall under the purview of Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act for federally funded projects.

Since we don’t know at the present time what the ultimate funding source for this project will be, we have to assume that federal funds could be involved in its development. Under Section 4(f), there must be no prudent or feasible alternative to affecting a Section 4(f) property, such as a park or NRHP eligible property, before you can consider affecting it. Therefore, parks and NRHP eligible properties are essentially fatal flaws unless there is no other feasible or prudent alternative. At this point, it looks like we will be able to develop alternatives that avoid impacts to parks and NRHP eligible properties, so it is very likely that alternatives affecting parks or NRHP-eligible properties will be eliminated from further consideration.

Is there a project that goes from D.B. Wood Road to IH-35?

Yes, there is another project that runs from D.B. Wood to IH-35 – the Southwest Bypass. This is the preservation of right-of-way to the south of Georgetown. The City of Georgetown and Williamson County are currently working on this project together.

The Southwest Bypass is a route intended to take traffic from SH 29 west of Georgetown to SH 130 on the eastern side of the city, resulting in reduced congestion on University Avenue. The bypass interchange crosses SH 29 about 4,000 feet west of D.B. Wood Road.

Please refer to the map found at:

http://www.georgetown.org/gis/gis_pdfmap_downloads/ThoroughfarePlan.pdf

Why was light rail not considered to join east and west Leander to Round Rock?

Capital Metro is the entity in charge of rail for Central Texas; however, Round Rock chose not to become a member of its service area, so it is not currently considered for service. This does not mean that a cooperative effort could not be looked at in the future if both parties are willing to consider it.

Does this mean more toll roads?

Because SH 29 may be built many years into the future, it is unclear what funding mechanisms will be available. Currently, transportation dollars are scarce. The Capital Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) is the regional entity that allocates federal and state transportation money. When the time comes, that entity will determine the financing, including whether or not a toll is needed, based on money available.

Why is the County studying the SH 29 Corridor?

The goal of the SH 29 Corridor Study has always been to help Williamson County plan for the future. The highway is the only major east-west corridor running through the heart of Williamson County, and current and future development will place a huge burden on this one road. Today, approximately 20,000 new residences have already been platted in the surrounding area; that translates into 50,000 to 60,000 more people who would use SH 29 in the next 20 years. More is anticipated.

Studies indicate that during the next 20 years, traffic volume on SH 29 will grow by significant amounts. In fact, it is projected that daily traffic will increase by 625 percent at SH 29 and the Burnet County line; by nearly 350 percent in Liberty Hill; by almost 300 percent at U.S. 183; and by more than 220 percent at Riverchase Blvd. The growth is coming; studying SH 29 now allows the County to plan for it in a smart and prudent way.

Studying it now is also intended to save taxpayers money. If additional land for road expansion is not preserved soon, more than likely, we will not be able to widen the road in the future – it will simply be too expensive. An example of that situation is occurring on RM 620 in Round Rock. Failing to plan for an expansion has allowed development to occur up to the existing roadway, making it much more expensive, if not impossible, to buy the developed right-of-way for necessary roadway expansion.

Where are the dates that generally accompany a timeline?

When the Williamson County Commissioners announced the SH 29 Corridor Study last October, they committed to identifying a preferred alignment within one year. The study is currently on schedule to meet that timeframe. The process at a high-level is as follows:

- Project Kickoff (October 2007)
- Property Owner Meetings (October 2007)
- Develop Alternatives (October 2007 – August 2008)
- Open Houses (May 2008)
- Elimination of Alignments due to Fatal Flaws (August 2008)
- Selection of Preferred Alternative (September 2008)

Presentation of Preferred Alternative (September 2008)
Development of Preliminary Schematic (September 2008)
Presentation of Preliminary Schematic (October 2008)
Initiate Land-Purchase Options Discussion with Interested Landowners (Fall 2008)
Finalize Schematic (December 2008)
Presentation of Schematic (January 2009)
Begin Right-of-Way Purchase (To Be Determined)

Data collection and public input on alternatives will run through the end of July, and input on the preferred alignment will be sought through December 2008. This timeline is subject to change; if changes do occur, Williamson County will notify the public.

How can I provide feedback to the County about the SH 29 Corridor Study?

Williamson County is interested in citizen input about the SH 29 Corridor Study. The open houses on May 12 and 13 were held for exactly that purpose – to gain feedback about the project. Going forward, public input is welcomed and considered with the same importance as what was submitted at the open houses. You may e-mail information to roads@wilco.org or call (512) 943-1195. When SH 29 public meetings are scheduled in the future, Williamson County will ensure notices are distributed.

When will the County purchase the property?

Only some right-of-way will be acquired in the near future. The County does not have funds to purchase all the right-of-way, so it will focus its efforts on willing sellers.

Will there be a condemnation process?

The Commissioners Court has no plans to acquire any right-of-way through eminent domain in the near future.

When the County purchases a property, how long before a property owner is required to move?

If there is a lease agreement, the County usually does not require a property owner to relocate until a contract is awarded for the construction project. The property owner may also usually continue operations (business, farming, grazing, etc.) until the contract is awarded.

Who will maintain the land once it is purchased?

The County will maintain the land as it normally does for other right-of-way, unless the property owner chooses to remain on the property through a lease agreement.

Can property owners leave fencing and gates?

Fencing and gates can remain until a contract is awarded for the construction project. At that time, the fence and gates will be relocated either by the property owner if he/she was compensated or by the County if he/she was not compensated.

Will the County carry liability insurance on the property it owns?

The County is a self-insured governmental agency.

Will the County prevent retail and office space from being built in the selected corridor, even if it has not purchased the property?

The County will not prevent any structures from being constructed within the proposed right-of-way, so long as the structures are in compliance with the set-back provisions of the Williamson County Subdivision Regulations.

How will the County calculate the price of properties you decide to purchase?

A copy of the Property Owners Bill of Rights may be found by visiting the Williamson County Web site at <http://www.wilcogov.org/CountyDepartments/RoadBondProgram/tabid/660/Default.aspx>

This document outlines all of the rights of property owners when a government agency is interested in acquiring their property for a public purpose. Generally speaking, the County must pay the market value of the property, which is based on the average of comparable sales of similar property in the vicinity of the subject tract at the time of acquisition. The purchase price is based on a current appraisal of the property.

When will the County be able to purchase all the property required to build the highway?

Some of the property may be purchased in the near future, but not through eminent domain. The remaining property may be purchased at a much later date and is dependent on several factors, including, but not limited to, the success of future bond elections in Williamson County and the ability of TxDOT to secure additional funding.

Will the County buy a property owner's entire parcel/lot or just the amount of land that is required for the road?

Governmental entities are only able to purchase the amount of property that is actually needed for the project expansion.