

New highway coming (really)

[TxDOT finds funds for SH 195 north of Austin](#)

Premium content from Austin Business Journal - by Jacob Dirr, ABJ Staff

Friday, April 1, 2011

One of the silver linings of a lingering recession — the reduced cost of construction — is helping complete an expansion of State Highway 195, also known as the “Highway of Death,” in Williamson County sooner than many expected.

The highway — linking Georgetown, at I-35, with the Army’s Fort Hood in Killeen — is a two-lane road that is to be widened to four lanes to improve safety, traffic flow, economic development and fuel efficiency.

The first phase of the project was recently awarded to Louisiana-based James Construction Group, whose \$29.5 million low bid was \$17.5 million less than the initial estimate.

The leftover money is being allocated to complete the rest of the project, expected to cost \$53.9 million in total.

Without such good fortune, the Texas Department of Transportation would have been left with a highway that bottlenecks in the middle because there was not enough money allocated to widen the entire system.

“Now you won’t have this one gap section,” Austin District Engineer **Carlos Lopez** said. “It’s really cool.”

Because TxDOT is projected to run out of construction money in 2012 and existing funds are allocated years in advance, “it would have taken something Herculean, like a federal stimulus, to get that funded,” Lopez said.

U.S. Rep. **John Carter**, R-Round Rock, has been a staunch advocate of the highway expansion, Lopez said. And while it did not directly impact state leaders’ decision to accelerate construction, “everybody knows his interest in the project.”

Carter could not be reached for comment.

In 2005, he secured \$4.8 million from the federal government to connect SH 195 and I-35 to the then-newly opened Killeen-Fort Hood Regional Airport, and he obtained \$1.6 million to aid in the highway-widening project.

As it stands, the first two phases of the project are slated to be completed in three years. Lopez said land must be acquired for the newly funded stage, and an environmental study must be conducted, but the project could go to bid in 2012, taking at least three years to complete.

While the duration of construction diminishes the immediate impact of such a project, regional planners are excited because the road will ensure the region will be able to accommodate huge amounts of projected growth.

While Georgetown, north of Austin, was on the outer edge of the last wave of Central Texas growth, Georgetown Economic Development Director **Mark Thomas** expects to be in the “center of the next wave.”

In the next three decades, Georgetown is projected to grow from 50,000 to 300,000 people, he said.

Besides bringing more motorists through Georgetown — where they may stop to spend money, locals hope — Thomas said making it easier for people to travel to Fort Hood and back could entice more military retirees to settle in Georgetown.

Sun City, a senior-oriented Del Webb residential development near Georgetown, houses some 10,000 people, Thomas said.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin