

# Plan pitches barriers for dangerous part of Texas 71

## 'Safety fund' also proposed to help pay to widen deadly highway.

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**A treacherous four-lane stretch of Texas 71 west of Austin would be divided temporarily with concrete barriers and other sections probably would be expanded to five lanes over the next four years using a newly created local "safety fund," Texas Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, announced Wednesday.**

Installation of the barriers, to run almost two miles from Bee Creek Road to Haystack Cove, would require environmental approval, something that the Texas Department of Transportation hopes to accomplish by July 1. The estimated cost of this initial step: \$850,000.

The agency also would install temporary turnaround ramps at each end — barriers will make left turns impossible — and add a traffic light just west of Haystack Cove. In addition, the Texas Transportation Commission last week reduced the speed limit from the City of Bee Cave to the Pedernales River from 65 mph to 60 mph.

"In perhaps the most dangerous area of 71, you will no longer have people able to cross the center line," said Watson, joined at a news conference by Chantal McVey, widow of one of the 11 people killed in traffic accidents on this section of Texas 71 in the past 18 months. "We want this done as quickly as possible."

Highway officials say the barriers can be in place by late this year or early 2009.

If all goes as Watson hopes, the entire 18-mile stretch of Texas 71 from Oak Hill to RM 2322 at the Pedernales River would have five lanes and six-foot paved shoulders by the end of 2011. The estimated overall cost is about \$75 million.

The first, interim step involves the most dangerous portion of Texas 71 — the Bee Creek valley several miles west of Bee Cave. There have been multiple fatal wrecks in the area, most of them head-on collisions in which wet conditions and the curving, hilly terrain were factors.

TxDOT weeks ago had announced other short-term steps to address the situation, including laying down more water-absorbent pavement in the area where many of the wrecks have occurred (at a cost of \$2.2 million) and roughening the pavement. But residents of western Travis County continued to push for the barriers and a lower speed limit.

"It means so much to me that another family will not have to go through what my children and I went through. Thank you," McVey said, fighting back tears. Her husband, Troy, and another man died in a head-on collision in October 2006 just west of Bee Creek. McVey has three children under 8 years old.

On a separate track, Watson recommends creating a safety fund as a long-term solution.

Under that proposal, subject to approval by the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization board, CAMPO would set aside at least \$30 million for emergency safety projects. The money would come from \$65 million that the state Transportation Department had allocated to toll projects on Texas 71 and U.S. 290. The money for the toll projects would be replenished by the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, assuming the agency's ongoing attempt to get financing succeeds.

Over time, Watson and authority director Mike Heiligenstein said, the fund could be sustained by profits from toll roads run by the authority.

Watson said the intent is that money from the fund would be matched by local governments, such as Travis County or the City of Austin.

Here's what officials foresee happening on Texas 71 between Oak Hill and the Pedernales River:

U.S. 290 to Silvermine Drive: Widening the road would be part of a \$115 million upgrade of the Texas 71/U.S. 290 tollway interchange.

Silvermine Drive to Arroyo Canyon Drive: Officials hope to use the safety fund as part of a \$30.6 million project to widen Texas 71 to five lanes. Bob Daigh, the state Transportation Department's Austin district engineer, said he hopes that projects using safety fund money could begin within 18 months, taking another two years or so to complete.

Arroyo Canyon Drive to Uplands Ridge Drive: The Transportation Department, working with Watson's office, in recent days has found the \$15.1 million to widen the road to five lanes and said it hopes to begin the project in 2009.

Hamilton Pool Road to Bee Creek Road: The \$13.7 million to widen the road to five lanes would come from the safety fund and local contributions.

Bee Creek Road to RM 2322: The cost to widen this stretch to five lanes is estimated at \$14.3 million. TxDOT has committed \$5.6 million to widen a two-mile stretch from R.O. Drive to RM 2322, and work should begin late this year.

The rest of the money for the section, including eventually widening it in the area where the barriers would go in, allowing their removal, would come from the safety fund and local contributions. The barriers, the lower speed limit and pavement improvements would serve as an interim solution.

Installing the concrete barriers in the Bee Creek valley stretch, where the road has negligible shoulders and 12-foot lanes, will mean the road would have four 11-foot lanes. TxDOT, as part of the environmental process to get approval for the barriers, will hold a public hearing April 24.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**