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Road may spark development

Austin Business Journal - by [Kate Harrington](#) ABJ Staff

A long-planned road in Williamson County is finally moving forward and could pave the way for developers to get at one of the area's most sought-after swaths of land.

The O'Connor extension, as the project is called, will extend O'Connor Drive south from its current terminus at RM 620 near Brushy Creek to connect with State Highway 45 North. O'Connor currently ends on the northern edge of the Robinson Ranch, a roughly 7,000-acre patch of land owned by the Robinson family. The new road, which has been in the county and city of Austin's long-range plans for years, will cut across part of that ranch, and, according to some, could open part of it to development.

Whether or not the road will lead to development is up to the family, Williamson County Commissioner Lisa Birkman said, although she said the road will enable development possibilities on the land.

Robinson family members couldn't be reached for comment but they have engaged land planning firms in the past to evaluate their options.

The ranch is loosely bounded by FM 1325, Parmer Lane and RM 620 in Travis and Williamson counties.

"It sure wouldn't hurt it," said Joe Duncan, founder of Duncan Commercial LLC, of the new road's potential for spurring development on the land. "But it depends on the willingness of the seller to develop it."

Duncan said nearly every major developer in the U.S. has at some time tried to meet with the Robinson family because — as the last large undeveloped piece of acreage in the Austin metro area — the ranch is immensely appealing property. In 2004 the city of Austin annexed 6,300 acres of the ranch into the city's limits as a planned unit development zoning district, which would allow for residential, commercial and industrial development.

"There have been land plans done and proposals made, and the Robinson family has sold off little bits here and there, but [by and large] they haven't been sellers," Duncan said.

The idea of connecting SH 45 and RM 620 was initiated in 1999, Birkman said. Voters approved a bond issue to extend a different road, Wyoming Springs, in 2000, but plans to extend that road didn't pass environmental clearance hurdles, and eventually O'Connor Drive instead became the proposed extension.

Birkman said the county had been relying on the Texas Department of Transportation to pay for the roughly \$25 million interchange at SH 45. And since TxDOT has been going through its own financial troubles, that money has been far from guaranteed.

All that changed several weeks ago when TxDOT Executive Director Amadeo Saenz said the department will fund the interchange, Birkman said.

Mike Weaver, a road consultant to Williamson County, said the county will likely hold a public hearing in July and could start construction on the road by the first quarter 2010. PBS&J has been hired by the county to do the engineering on the road.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin