

Texas Mayors Petition Feds to Reject the Trans Texas Corridor

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Holland, Texas – The Eastern Central Texas Sub-Regional Planning Commission (ECTSRPC) has filed a petition with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) demanding they reject the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Trans-Texas Corridor I-35 project.

The Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC) is a quarter mile-wide transportation system championed by Governor Rick Perry as the first leg of a superhighway designed to connect Canada to Mexico for international trade. The Texas Legislature authorized the TTC in 2003, and Texan's have been fighting the massive project ever since.

However, it wasn't until August of 2007 that a group of five mayors and their city's school districts representing a total of 6,000 citizens banded together, that they found a way to slow down the massive project. They formed the ECTSRPC under Chapter 391 of the Local Government Code which gave them the ability to require the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) to coordinate the project with the Commission. They, in effect, created a thirty-mile gap in the middle of the TTC I-35 corridor route.

During the first meeting with TXDOT in October of 2007, the agency stated that the DEIS, the environmental study necessary to move the project forward, would be sent to the FHWA for final approval by January 2008. However, Commission members raised objections and cited critical concerns all stemming from TXDOT's refusal to study the direct impact on the local communities and their economies.

Last year, they even called on the FHWA to require the agency to conduct a supplemental study. It has been 20 months since the first meeting, and TXDOT has yet to file for final approval.

The corridor will take 146 acres per mile. The total length of the Texas I-35 corridor spans approximately 550 miles directly affecting more than 81,000 acres of private property and hundreds of small, rural communities. This direct impact, such as the division of award-winning school districts and cutting citizens off from emergency services, was never considered in the DEIS.

Also, barely mentioned in the DEIS is the critical farmland known as the Blacklands Prairie. TXDOT's preferred route will destroy thousands of acres of the Blacklands, which is the heart of the local economies represented by the ECTSRPC. The Blacklands are considered to be some of the most productive and unique farmlands in the nation. They produce bountiful crops annually without irrigation making it a prized resource in modern American where water conservation is a key concern.

"The TTC destroys our farmlands and threatens our ability to feed our nation," commented local businessman and ECTSRPC director, Ralph Snyder, "Yet TXDOT did not think it was worth mentioning in their environmental study."

In response, the mayors and school districts took a stand, right in the middle of the proposed superhighway. Now, they are calling on the Federal Highway Administration to reject the study in its entirety and begin anew, this time taking the local concerns into account. According to the Texas Administrative Code, the three year window to complete the study expired as of April 4, 2009, giving rise to the petition to reject the current study.

“Significant changes have occurred since TXDOT started the original DEIS, and by law, they must begin a new one,” stated Mae Smith, Mayor of Holland, Texas and president of the ECTSRPC. “Texans have lost confidence in this department so we are calling on the FHWA to delegate a new agent or conduct a new study themselves,” Smith continued.

This past Legislative Session did not go well for TXDOT, which was up for reauthorization. The Legislature failed to pass legislation that would have continued the state agency. In addition, the Legislature failed to authorize Comprehensive Development Agreements necessary to continue the TTC I-35 project. And, prior to the 2009 Legislative Session, TXDOT launched a campaign renaming the TTC and promising the public significant changes to the original concept.

“All of these changes require the FHWA to begin a new study,” claims Fred Grant, a consulting attorney with the commission. Grant believes that since the Legislature failed to reauthorize TXDOT, none of the provisions allowing construction of the Trans-Texas Corridor survived, which in turn left no authority for TXDOT to proceed with plans to construct TTC I-35.

“What these five un-paid mayor’s and their school districts have done is remarkable,” commented Margaret Byfield, executive director of Stewards of the Range, which helped the Commission organize. “They have taken on one of the nation’s largest state agencies, a national agenda to build a road from Mexico to Canada, and international financiers looking to make millions from Texas drivers by exercising their local control authority.”

The ECTSRPC filed the 27-page petition with FHWA on Thursday, June 18, 2009.

For a copy of the petition and more information go to www.stewards.us.