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Solutions sought for Bexar road woes

By John W. Gonzalez January 12, 2016



Photo: Ronald Cortes, For Express News / Express-News

South Side residents held a press conference before going to the Commissioners Court on Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2016 to protest the poor conditions of the private roads in their colonia.

Amid passionate pleas for help from South Side residents, Bexar County officials on Tuesday vowed to explore ways to improve shoddy, unmaintained private roads in unincorporated areas.

The pledge came with conditions, including a call for the residents to “put some skin in the game,” as Precinct 2 Commissioner Paul Elizondo put it.

Previous efforts to find public funds for colonia street improvements have run into roadblocks, but Commissioners Court directed staff to continue working

on an assessment of roads that might qualify for help, perhaps based on public-safety considerations.

Elizondo and other commissioners were adamant that a county-wide approach must be taken to go beyond the concerns raised in Highland Oaks subdivision, where residents complained that school buses, EMS, fire, law enforcement and deliver vehicles have trouble accessing their homes due to rough, sandy roadways.

“Don’t let this go any longer,” pleaded Molly Martinez, speaking for Highland Oaks residents in far south Bexar County.

Backed by COPS/Metro, the Highland Oaks residents and supporters applauded the court’s decision to explore possible remedies, now that HUD officials have said they’re ineligible for grants due to the roads being privately owned.

In recent months, Precinct 1 Commissioner Sergio “Chico” Rodriguez has been working with the Highland Oaks residents to find solutions. The effort led to still-underway county assessment of similar roadways, and Tuesday some of the findings were released by county Engineer Renee Green.

One key detail: The county has about 270 streets, covering 70 miles, that were never accepted for county maintenance. Estimated cost for paving them would be \$130.7 million, with \$85 million going to roads in Precinct 1 and \$28 million to Precinct 4, Green’s report said.

Precinct 3 Commissioner Kevin Wolff said he wants any plan to be a fair, long-term approach.

“I want to start sending this message right now: I’m not going to parse this stuff, I’m not going to say, ‘This road is worse than that road ... these people can’t afford it but these people can,’” Wolff said.

“We need to come up with a decision that fixes all these roads,” he said. If not, “I don’t think we’re doing justice to those that might not have the limelight that Highland Oaks has or Camelot has right now,” Wolff said.

County Judge Nelson Wolff had already put the kabosh on consideration of paving private streets in gated communities, which increasingly have come to the county seeking help. Nearly 300 miles of street fall into that category, and paving them would cost a staggering \$644 million, Green estimated.

“That’s an easy ‘no,’ in my opinion,” the county judge said.

Regarding the estimate for paving unmaintained roads, he added: “There’s no way this court is going to vote to spend \$100 million. You’re going to have to narrow it down some way,” he told Green.

Elizondo predicted the county’s best options might be to pursue funds to abate the safety issues posed by unpassable roads.

“We cannot ... expect the rest of the community to pay for something that somebody is avoiding,” Elizondo said. He said he’ll be watching for “the eagerness of that community (Highland Oaks) to put some skin in the game” to improve their own roads.

Also Tuesday, commissioners joined San Antonio in pledging to raise awareness about the decline of the monarch butterfly and its dwindling South Texas habitat. The county will assist the city, UTSA, San Antonio Zoo, San Antonio River Authority and SAWS in taking steps recommended by the National Wildlife Federation.

Finally, commissioners learned that the county’s voter rolls are approaching 1 million registered voters. The tally stands at 970,000 — up from 875,000 four

years ago for the last presidential election — and grows daily with numerous groups actively registering voters as the March 1 primaries approach.

Marking a new twist in the registration effort, Elections Administrator Jacque Callanen said the local staff of Univision, the Spanish-language TV network, soon will be trained and deputized as voter registrars.

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