

San Antonio Express-News

South Side community finally getting paved roads

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Finally, construction has begun for paved roads in Highland Oaks.

This is the neighborhood in South Bexar County where the roads are so bad school buses stopped driving on them. They were getting stuck in the mud on rainy days and spinning their wheels in sand during dry conditions. The bumpy roads are so jarring that emergency vehicles have had problems navigating them. When we toured the roads four years ago, we were taken aback. Kids walked these dirt roads to get from the bus stop to their homes, dodging potholes and roaming dogs. For many, it was a long walk.



The roads in Highland Oaks became so bad school buses stopped driving on them. That will change now that road construction has finally started for the South Side neighborhood. Photo: /Josh Brodesky

The ground in this area of the county is a soft loam, a soil combination of sand and clay. Residents' do-it-yourself attempts to fill the potholes and level the ground produced only short-term relief. For decades, the low-income residents of Highland Oaks pleaded for help with their roads but were rebuffed by the county.

Why?

When developers platted Highland Oaks in 1959 there were no rules or regulations in place regarding roads. County officials rejected pleas from residents to have the roads fixed. Officials said the streets had been improperly built and were never properly deeded to the county, making the roads private. The county maintained that position even after a 2015 Express-News Editorial Board investigation revealed the county had accepted the roads as part of a settlement in a lawsuit 30 years ago.

In 2016, after continued media scrutiny and intervention by COPS/Metro Alliance and the Southside Independent School District, county commissioners had a change of heart. Commissioners decided to inventory all roads in the county that might be in a similar situation to begin tackling the problem.

Highland Oaks streets were among 103 roads identified in 31 subdivisions by the county's Public Works Department as being in dire need of repair. The county has established a 10-year plan with projected price tag, in 2017, of \$28 million.

The 2.39 miles of unpaved roads in Highland Oaks made the top of the list, and the work was funded in the 2017-18 budget. But the scope of the work needed there is much greater than originally proposed. It will include much-needed drainage in an area that floods easily. It also has been expanded to allow San Antonio Water System to replace undersized water lines under the roadways that will be paved.

When the project is complete, the county's investment in Highland Oaks will top \$4.25 million. The design calls for two 12-foot lanes, 4-foot paved shoulder and bar ditches for drainage. In addition, SAWS is spending \$770,000 on the utility improvements.

These improvements will increase the quality of life tremendously for a community where residents have long lived without some of the basic amenities many of us take for granted. Inaccessibility on roads is a public safety issue. It's also an equity issue. This should have been addressed decades ago.

Regrettably, Southside Independent School District students who live in Highland Oaks will continue to have to hike these treacherous roads to catch the school bus for the next three semesters. The paving of the eight streets in Highland Oaks will be done in phases and is expected to be completed by Christmas 2020, said David Wegmann, the county engineering services manager.

Deplorable road conditions that have perpetuated in Highlands Oaks are reminiscent of those found in the developing world and have no place in a Texas urban county. Construction has finally begun, but the end of the project cannot come soon enough.