



IN THE NEWS

Friday, October 16, 2015

Austin American-Statesman

OPINION

Commentary: U.S. 183 South redo is needed and overdue

BY RAY WILKERSON AND MARGARET GOMEZ - SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Southeast Travis County is about to be transformed. We may know U.S. 183 South as another roadway that crawls during rush hour each day. You know, the road we want to avoid unless that's our only option to get to our destination.

But U.S. 183 South is about to see much needed improvement. And with that, an opportunity for employment, new businesses and new markets for established ones.

How do we know this? Because at the mobility authority, we've seen it before. We cut our teeth a decade ago on 183A in Cedar Park, and the economic development that was generated from that project has been nothing short of transformative. Between 2010 and 2012, Cedar Park was the fourth-fastest growing city in the nation. New shopping centers, hospitals and major retailers have flocked to the corridor. We completed the Manor Expressway in 2014; all signs indicate it will experience similar growth.

U.S. 183 South will be the largest roadway project in Central Texas since Texas 130. It will expedite traffic to Bergstrom International Airport by offering a nonstop, signal-free route, feature cyclist and pedestrian accommodations and improve parks along the route of the corridor. Of course, the project will create jobs in the short term, with broader growth in the long term, touching home and business owners alike.

And it's about time. U.S. 183 was constructed in the mid-1960s. In the 50 years since, the U.S. 183 corridor has become one of the Austin area's most important arterials — but improvements to it have been relatively minor.

The U.S. 183 South project represents the first significant improvements to the corridor in the past 50 years. When completed in about five years, the expressway will include three new toll lanes and three improved nontolled, general-purpose lanes in each direction between U.S. 290 and Texas 71.

Those steel and concrete improvements are long overdue, but the project also holds out the realistic promise of giving Southeast Travis County a needed economic boost. That's what our experience with 183A toll clearly tells us.

In 2014, sales taxes along 183A increased to \$4.3 million, a \$2.2 million or 49 percent increase since 2010. The area's range is within 1/2 mile from 183A. That same year, hotel fund occupancy taxes in the 183A area increased by \$240,000, or 46 percent, since 2010.

There's still more to tell. You may recall that there was a great deal of skepticism about a toll road in the increasingly congested quadrant of northwest Travis County. No one would use it, some said. But when the first sections were opened in 2007, demand for its use was far greater than projected. Not only that, but the roadway has had an appreciable impact on property values.

Between 2007 to 2014, new building construction and improvements to the corridor increased the property values over \$476 million, or 66 percent. By that past performance measure, U.S. 183 South will not only help people move around, it will help people move up.

When the Bergstrom International Airport opened in 1999, the southern end of U.S. 183 took on added significance, and, of course, traffic. Its daily usage is now more than 60,000 cars and trucks a day – equal to the population of Cedar Park. That demand isn't going to go down, only increase. The U.S. 183 South project is the culmination of a long process. Since 2011, the Mobility Authority has been working with Texas Department of Transportation engineers and residents on the corridor to find new approaches to move traffic and people along U.S. 183.

Our solution not only will move vehicle traffic, but will truly be a multimodal project. The Mobility Authority is committed to constructing cyclist and pedestrian-friendly facilities that enhance our region's quality of life. This commitment includes the design and implementation of Shared Use Paths, sidewalks and cross-street connections as part of every project, including U.S. 183 South. To date, the Mobility Authority has invested \$50 million in over 90 lanes miles that are either planned or in place.

On March 6, TxDOT approved the Environmental Assessment for U.S. 183 South by issuing a "finding of no significant impact," meaning we can now move to the final design and construction phase. We're aware that we may encounter some bumps in the

road, as is often the case with projects of this magnitude. Our mission is to help Central Texas regain the initiative on mobility – and help drivers reach their destinations with minimal delays.

That is a daunting task, and it doesn't get easier given the area's growth. As we prepare to launch construction on U.S. 183 South, we know there will be short-term pains. But we should keep in mind the long-term gains: the positive and lasting impact not only for motorists but also on the area we call home. We will continue our commitment to delivering a quality product and to working with the communities that surround this eight-mile, \$800 million project. U.S. 183 South isn't just another road – it's your road.

Ray A. Wilkerson is Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority Board Chairman and Margaret Gómez is Travis County Precinct 4 Commissioner.



Ray Wilkerson, Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority