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BETA



Thursday, April 7, 2016 by Caleb Pritchard (<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/author/cpritchard2001/>)

 ROADS

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East Austin superhighway breaks ground

Scores of people gathered on the northern banks of the Colorado River in East Austin on Wednesday morning to watch the ceremonial birth of a massive new roadway expansion effort.

Through the distant white noise of fast-moving traffic zipping along on three overhead bridges, the crowd heard Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority officials lavish praise on the 183 South Project (<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2016/03/massive-road-expansion-bears-down-on-austins-east-side/>).

“We’ve got 60,000 cars a day out here,” CTRMA Board of Directors Chair Ray Wilkerson said of the existing stretch of U.S. Highway 183 between U.S. Highway 290 and State Highway 71. “When we’re through with this, we’re gonna triple that capacity. That’s huge when you think about it. That’s going to go from Round Rock to the airport. So this truly is a regional project.”

Scheduled to be completed by 2020, the 183 South Project will turn the current roadway into a 12-lane superhighway. Three limited-access lanes in each direction will be tolled, while the three-lane frontage roads on either side will remain nontolled.

“I think this will be a new golden corridor with the type of employment base that will make the city very proud,” CTRMA Executive Director Mike Heiligenstein told the crowd. “And I think Austin will reap the benefits of this for decades to come.”

State Sen. Kirk Watson explained how the expanded road will complement the planned expansion of Interstate 35. “When we get to the really, really hard part of I-35, which is in downtown Austin, we need to have a way to get people around downtown,” said Watson. “And one of the best ways is going to be this roadway right here.”

In her remarks, Travis County Commissioner Margaret Gómez praised the plan's preservation of the historic Montopolis Bridge and its conversion into a bicycle and pedestrian crossing.

(<http://www.austinmonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/183-South-Montopolis-Bridge.jpg>)

“East Austin has experienced an economic boost, and it remains critical that we acknowledge the history that once divided it from the greater Austin area and turn our attention to a future that establishes that connection in a more permanent way,” Gómez said.



Plans for the new roadway call for the elimination of five existing intersections. Several new pedestrian bridges will be built across the highway in addition to the converted Montopolis Bridge. Of the project's nearly \$750 million budget, \$25 million will be spent on those bridges as well as separate trails along the roadway.

After the remarks from the dignitaries, the crowd moved outside the tent to witness a massive drilling machine turn the first dirt on the project. The occasion was marked by the reports of two confetti cannons and followed by the more traditional photo op of officials in hard hats wielding commemorative shovels.

(<http://www.austinmonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/183-South-Officials-shoveling-dirt.jpg>)

Afterward, Heiligenstein told the *Austin Monitor* that he is not worried about new development along the 8-mile ribbon of asphalt driving more demand for the road and thus creating more congestion in the future.



“The lanes on this road, when opened, will have surplus capacity for probably a couple of decades,” Heiligenstein said.

Top photo: Workers watching.

Middle photo: Montopolis Bridge.

Bottom photo: Aforementioned officials in hard hats wielding commemorative shovels.

All photos by Caleb Pritchard.

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KEY PLAYERS & TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE

CTRMA (<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/tag/ctrma/>): The Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority. A governmental agency created, according to its web site, in 2002 to "improve the transportation system in Williamson and Travis counties." The site also notes that the agency's "mission is to implement innovative, multi-modal transportation solutions that reduce congestion and create transportation choices that enhance quality of life and economic vitality." In addition to other responsibilities, the agency oversees a set of toll roads in the region.

Kirk Watson (<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/tag/state-senator-kirk-watson/>): State Senator Kirk Watson represents District 14 and was first elected to the Texas Senate in 2006, as a democrat. He is a former mayor of Austin.

Margaret Gómez (<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/tag/margaret-gomez/>): Margaret Gómez has served as the Precinct Four Travis County Commissioner since 1995, and was the first Mexican-American elected to the position.

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