

Road revamps on South side now under way

By Tony Cantú
Contributing Writer

Fueled by Southside growth in general and redevelopment of the former Brooks Air Force

Base into an industrial park in particular, state officials have launched a multimillion-dollar street revamping of major thoroughfares, including New Braunfels and Southcross boulevards.

The centerpiece of the \$30 million Texas Department of Transportation project will be removal of three cloverleafs on the Interstate 37-Loop 13 interchange off Southeast Military Drive, said spokeswoman Darla

Laughter. In place of the cloverleafs will be a diamond-shaped separator enabling easier traffic flow, she said.

"The interchange there was

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the latest design in its time," Laughter said. "However, as with anything else, things are abated. The interchange upgrade to a diamond shape will allow motorists to pass easier through the area."

Surrounding the diamond will be elements intended to promote pedestrian traffic as well, in the form of nearby sidewalks and walk paths, she said. Traffic turnarounds, additional turn lanes and connectors enhancing I-37 access also will figure into the new design, she added. Traffic signals have since been installed at the site alerting motorists to alternative routes around the work site.

Another aspect of the work involves raising the New Braunfels, Southcross and Hot Wells bridges to meet the current clearance height standard of 16 feet, Laughter said. The latter bridge has already been closed for an expected four months as work to raise it begins, Laughter said. Also now closed are the northbound and southbound entrance ramps to I-37 from Hot Wells, she added.

Laughter said there is a sig-

nificant volume of big rig traffic passing through the area, many of them having to turn around to find alternative routes because of the limited bridge heights.

For more conventional traffic, a more noticeable improvement might be smoothing out of roadway, the spokeswoman noted. The IH37 main lanes between Fair Avenue and Pecan Valley Drive will be so modified, removing the rolling effect experienced by motorists, she said.

"This will eliminate that roller-coaster feeling," Laughter said. "It should smooth that bumpy feeling out."

The interchange project adjacent to Brooks City-Base — the industrial park that once housed Brooks AFB — is situated in an area of rapid commercial expansion in recent times, Laughter said. Anticipating the full pullout of Air Force personnel by 2011 at Brooks, officials there are readying the 1,246-acre campus for commercial development and have secured funds toward that end.

In March, the base secured a \$1.3 million state Defense Economic Adjustment to offset costs associated with opening up the facility to South Side arteries. Brooks officials invested

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heavily in extending South New Braunfels Avenue onto the site with an eye toward attracting private sector tenants in the future.

"What this will do is open up the former Brooks AFB by October 2010 or early 2011 with a major infrastructure project that allows major development to happen on our property," said Brooks Development Authority President and CEO Donald Jakeway in a previous interview. All told, the South New Braunfels extension is a \$47 million, multi-phase project that initially will expand the artery from South-

east Military Drive to Loop 410.

Laughter said that anticipated growth necessitates the need for surrounding road improvements: "We do projective studies in all areas of the city dealing with growth patterns, and the area around Brooks City-Base has had explosive growth."

While the motoring public should view the development as good news, Laughter acknowledged there will be some measure of inconvenience as roads are closed and re-routed during construction.

"There will be closures for certain," Laughter said. "Things should be quite interesting there in the next few weeks."

But residents should consider themselves fortunate to be getting the work, particularly in the face of what she labeled a TxDOT budget "crisis" that has delayed long-planned projects indefinitely as materials costs skyrocket.

"You hear TxDOT only focuses on the North Side and the South Side doesn't get any

attention, but we focus on the city as a whole," Laughter said. "It's important for us to accommodate everyone in the city. With our budget crisis, what's happened is that a lot of projects that were lined up have been put on the chopping block. Projects literally have to be in progress for us to get any funding, so if you're fortunate enough to be undergoing a project or have something scheduled, you should consider yourself lucky."

Although Laughter did not mention it during a telephone interview, the South Side also might consider itself fortunate in light of a widely reported TxDOT accounting error that has stalled many projects. As reported by the San Antonio Express-News in August, a TxDOT miscalculation in developing the agency's contract award schedule resulted in a \$1.1 billion overstatement of the funds available for projects statewide. A subsequent correction resulted in a \$71.5 million reduction in construction and maintenance funds for the San Antonio region.

As for the South Side cloverleaf project, work is expected to be completed by winter 2010.