

TxDOT renovating South Side streets, sidewalks

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Fueled by South Side growth and the redevelopment of Brooks Air Force Base, state officials have launched a multimillion-dollar street revamping of major thoroughfares, including South New Braunfels and Southcross boulevards.

The centerpiece of the \$30 million Texas Department of Transportation project will be removal of three clover leaves on the Interstate 37 South and Loop 13 interchange off Southeast Military Drive, said spokeswoman Darla Laughter.

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

"The interchange there was 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, including sidewalks and walk paths, Laughter said.

Traffic turnarounds, additional turn lanes and connectors enhancing Interstate 37 South access also will figure into the new design.

Traffic signals have since been installed at the site alerting motorists to alternative routes around the work site.

Another aspect of the work involves heightening of the South New Braunfels, Southcross boulevards 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 heighten it begins.

Also closed are the northbound and southbound entrance ramps to Interstate 37 south from Hot Wells.

Laughter said there is a significant 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.

Interstate 37 South's main lanes between Fair Avenue and Pecan Valley Drive will also be modified.

"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 roads.

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

The South New Braunfels extension is a \$47 million, multi-phase project that initially will expand the artery from Southeast Military Drive to Loop 410 South.

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," she said.

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."