

## **Officials: SH 68 will provide Donna with a new economic development corridor**

**By Ena Capucion** - January 10, 2017



DONNA, RGV – The Texas Department of Transportation held a public meeting Jan. 3 regarding the State Highway 68 Project – a four-lane highway that will run from Interstate Highway 2 (U.S. 83) in Donna to Interstate Highway 69-Central (U.S. 281) in Edinburg.

The meeting was held at Donna North High School and TxDOT officials said they were very impressed with the turnout and interest.

According to State Highway 68's (SH 68) Project Fact Sheet from the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), the project will be approximately 22 miles in length. SH 68 will improve mobility going north and south, relieve overall congestion on I-2 and I-69C as well as accommodate the growth of the region's population.

In June 2016, Ernesto Silva, the interim city manager of Donna, told the Rio Grande Guardian that the SH 68 Project stemmed from a proposal in 2004 connecting the south of Donna to the north of Edinburg. He said people thought the city personnel was crazy, but Silva saw the potential growth in the RGV and how it would all tie in and connect the international bridges.

“There are only so many miles of frontage on the expressway,” Silva said. “You cannot create more unless you have a new interstate. Having [SH 68] come from the south of Donna all the way to the north of Edinburg is going to provide a unique opportunity for us because now we will have a whole new economic development corridor. We are very excited. We see that as a great opportunity. Those interstates and expressways generate interest [and] companies want to locate along the access.”

Several years ago, the traffic along Interstate 2 and Interstate 69-C was not heavy. Now, the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission metropolitan statistical area (MSA) is the fifth largest MSA in Texas. Octavio Saenz, public information officer for TxDOT, said with UTRGV, SpaceX and the medical school, there are so many things happening in the Rio Grande Valley that is making the area very dynamic.

“In the state of Texas for the past 40 years, vehicle registration has gone up 174 percent,” Saenz said. “However, the vehicle capacity in those 40 years has only gone up 19 percent. Therefore, you have congestion in the big metropolitan areas and I think we need to start thinking like the metropolitan areas and think as one region. Because this road [will] not just benefit the Mid-Valley, but I think it benefits Cameron, Willacy and Starr County. If we start thinking like a region, we can see the benefits.”

Recently, one of TxDOT’s divisions developed a hot map where sensors were placed on commercial vehicles to track their routes. Based on the results, the main area vehicles go through are the Rio Grande Valley. Now, the Pharr Interchange that connects Pharr, Edinburg and McAllen has been compared to a bottleneck by state Sen. Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa of McAllen, due to its heavy congestion. The construction of SH 68 will relieve some of the traffic.

“If you look at the [100 most congested] commercial roads, at least one of the roads in the Rio Grande Valley is in the top 94,” Saenz said. “As a community and as a people that love this area and wants to see it thrive in education [and] economics, we have to embrace [the expansion and growth]. It doesn’t matter where you go. If you don’t have the infrastructure for transportation then the economic boom cannot occur.”

Public involvement is critical to the SH 68 Project. Back in 2014, the study expanded to include the municipalities of Alamo, Pharr, Donna, Edinburg, San Juan and San Carlos. In March of 2016, TxDOT presented five corridor options to the public. After feedback, TxDOT came back and represented four more options.

After receiving more comments, TxDOT created a decision matrix that went through 63 different criterias and chose the corridor that would have the least resulting congestion on residents, businesses, schools and churches.

“I have great admiration for the individuals that are here and the individuals that really see the need for additional capacity in the Rio Grande Valley,” Saenz said. “We know that this a dynamic area and it’s a place that we all call home. So, we want to make sure that the infrastructure is set in place so that we can continue to thrive.”

Because TxDOT values feedback, comments can be made on their website for 30 days after the public meeting was held.

*Editor’s Note: Videojournalist Apolonio Sandoval, Jr., contributed to this story from Donna, Texas.*