

# Mopac Redux

**Sid Covington**

Four years ago, the residents of west Austin joined with local elected officials to do something that conventional wisdom said was impossible — keep TxDOT from expanding Mopac into our neighborhoods.

In 2000, TxDOT began what it called the “Loop 1/US 183 Improvement Project.” They held a number of meetings in the neighborhoods along the project corridor. In general, the public opinion was that their views were ignored. In March 2001, TxDOT made a presentation to the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) where they publicly unveiled their designs and requested permission to move forward with the project (Phase 2). The alternative apparently preferred would have demolished some 166 homes and businesses and would have had a total of 17 lanes between Enfield Road and Windsor Road.

## **MoNAC**

In response to concerns voiced by the residents along Mopac in central Austin, a group of neighborhood associations came together as the Mopac Neighborhoods Associations Coalition (MoNAC). Austin's Mayor Kirk Watson supported MoNAC's position. After some 900 people appeared at the April 2001 CAMPO meeting to speak against allowing TxDOT to proceed to Phase 2, the strategy and position proposed by MoNAC was adopted by CAMPO.

## **SPECIAL COMMITTEE**

Basically, the strategy MoNAC proposed and Mayor Watson presented to CAMPO as an alternative to proceeding to Phase 2 called for the creation of a “Loop 1-US 183 Systems Analysis Special Committee” to review TxDOT's project and make recommendations. The Special Committee included CAMPO members and neighborhood representatives (Ian Inglis, Allan McMurtry, the late Neal Kocurek, and me). TxDOT was represented by their District Engineer, Bill Garbade.

The committee retained a “Technical Team” of seven nationally known consultants to review TxDOT's plans and develop more appropriate recommendations. These consultants included an urban planner, a landscape architect, a rail transit expert, transportation engineers, a noise and vibration expert, and a public involvement expert. Their conclusion, called the “Technical Team Report” confirmed what the residents intuitively knew: mobility on Mopac could be improved within the existing right-of-way boundaries and without elevating the roadway. Additionally, the rail tracks could be preserved for future commuter rail and sound walls could be installed reducing the noise in the neighborhoods. In short — Mopac could achieve improved mobility and the neighborhoods could benefit at the same time.

CAMPO and the City of Austin formally adopted the recommendations of the Technical Team although TxDOT abruptly canceled the project. Because of the formal adoption however, the recommendations provide the framework for future development projects on Mopac.

## **MEANWHILE**

Since the Mopac project was cancelled, a great deal has happened that has direct or indirect impact on Mopac. HB-3588 in the 78<sup>th</sup> Legislature (along with HB-2702 in the 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature) provided financing and development tools that allow the State to create tolled roadways and improvements and use the revenue from these tolls as a source for funding transportation projects in the region. In addition to having new funding tools, the Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District has been established. The Commuter Rail District is working with other State entities to relocate the Union Pacific “through” freight from the existing tracks. Bob Daigh is now the District Engineer for the Austin District.

TxDOT has recently initiated a new project to alleviate the congestion on Mopac. The first phase will be to add two “managed” lanes within the existing footprint of Mopac to provide relief from congestion. A major component of this first phase will be the installation of sound walls to buffer the adjacent neighborhoods from the roadway noise. TxDOT has retained the consulting firm of DMJM Harris as the project management team for the Mopac project. John Kelly, the Project Manager, has had significant experience developing projects with similar complexity as the Mopac corridor and is committed to making this something that everyone will be proud of.

Unlike the previous project, there are going to be numerous public meetings, surveys, design workshops and other ways for the citizens to make their viewpoints known.

It is very important that the residents of west Austin educate themselves on the project. Attend as many meetings as possible. Learn what the options are so you can make your informed choices known. A tremendous amount of effort went into creating an environment where TxDOT is willing to listen to the public and take its input; it is now up to us to provide it in a constructive manner.

*Sid Covington has been very involved in west Austin neighborhood issues for many years. He lives in the Highland Park-Balcones West neighborhood and is currently Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Austin San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District. Sid also serves on the Transportation Commission's Trans Texas Corridor Advisory Committee.*