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Drainage project concerns Northwood residents

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San Antonio city officials recently hosted a public meeting to update residents on progress of the first phase of the Oak Glen/Haskin low water crossing project, all but deciding to eliminate sidewalk construction from the plans.

Led by District 10 Councilman John Clamp, the Aug. 31 meeting attended by 20 residents was held at the Northwood Presbyterian Church, 518 Pike Place.

Clamp was joined by other city officials at the meeting, as well as a pair of representatives from Halff Associates, the engineering firm performing the work. After the drowning death of a motorist in the flood-prone section of town a dozen years ago, officials have sought to improve the terrain in an effort to improve water runoff.

To that end, \$1.8 million was allocated from a \$152 million bond program for city infrastructure projects - streets, bridges and sidewalk improvements - planned between the years 2007 and 2012.

The Oak Glen/Haskin portion, northeast of Alamo Heights, is one of 26 projects identified in the multimillion-dollar debt issuance targeting drainage improvements and reconstruction of Haskin from Cave Lane to Oak Glen.

Clamp said the amount allotted for the work is not enough to finish the first phase, adding that he would explore other financing options for the project's remaining part, which is now estimated to cost \$2.2 million.

"We have a project shortfall," Clamp said. "It looks like we can do 80 percent and still do a really good job with water conveyance to Salado Creek."

The news yielded murmurs in the crowd of residents who vividly recall heavy rains that caused flooding in 1998 and resulted in the death of a motorist in the area. One resident recalled the eerie sight of the dead motorist's vehicle ending up on his property after she was ejected from her vehicle.

The memory of that death lingered as the meeting's backdrop. Residents summoned the incident as their most compelling argument for needed enhancements to the 350-acre land parcel targeted for multi-phase upgrades.

Residents voiced concern at the pace of reconstruction given that casualty.

"The truth is, the watershed there are so long, any of the watersheds could've drowned that woman," said Anibal Gutierrez Jr., a city project manager. He noted the delicate balance that planners face deciding on which area portion to

concentrate: "The more money we spend upstream, the less we can spend downstream."

Gutierrez stressed improvements continue on the land, even if that work may appear to be at a standstill. The abundance of underground utility lines needing lowering and re-alignment is a critical part of the work largely unseen by passersby, he said.

"The underground utilities are first," he said. "We have to inform the utility companies like CPS (City Public Service) and SAWS (San Antonio Water System) before we can start working on the street and that's when you start to see the work."

But there were also aesthetical considerations voiced among attendees, especially an aversion to seeing sidewalks installed amidst their natural surroundings. Seeking an impromptu show of hands in favor or opposed to sidewalk installation, Clamp found a unanimous vote against the pedestrian pathways.

"We're going to go back and look at the sidewalks, channel and alley drainage," he said, ticking off the major areas of concern gauged from those gathered.

Gutierrez said the city must adhere to a uniform code that calls for sidewalk installation at such projects, but a waiver could be sought to eliminate them from the design.

The meeting's outcome did not seem to appease Bill Schiller, vice president of the Oak Park-Northwood Neighborhood Association representing some 3,000 homeowners.

He was the most vocal of the attendees with his pointed questions. After the meeting, he complained of the project's pace and its re-assessed cost.

Regarding the latter, he said association members repeatedly asked if the original amount would suffice during the bonds' planning phases and were given assurances it would.

"What's disconcerting is that these are city numbers," he said.

Schiller also cited installation of a specialized cable at the site intended to stop disabled vehicles from being carried away by flood waters. While endorsing installing the device, he said it was installed in 2003 - five years after the motorist's death.

"It takes someone to die, and it took them five years. The city is always reactive and not proactive," he added. Clamp said further meetings will be set to update residents.

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GRAPHIC: Haskin Road just north of Cave Lane as seen after a line of showers hit the San Antonio area Sept. 9.
PHOTO: Photo by Edmond Ortiz

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