

Heights, TxDOT united on Broadway

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



William Luther / Staff file photo Broadway at Grayson is shown in January. The city of Alamo Heights is agreeing to work with the state on a Broadway project that will not cut the number of driving lanes on the busy road.

San Antonio and Alamo Heights were surprised and frustrated in January when the Texas Department of Transportation rejected plans for Broadway that had been in the works for years, citing concerns with how reducing driving lanes might cause congestion.

But now, even as San Antonio continues to push for its plans, Alamo Heights is agreeing to work with TxDOT to proceed with a Broadway project that will not cut the number of driving lanes along the busy thoroughfare.

Alamo Heights Mayor Bobby Rosenthal said the city wants to move forward in part to address flooding issues. The 7/10-mile stretch of Broadway that goes

through Alamo Heights is in a flood plain, often causing Broadway and businesses to flood when it rains.

In statements to the Texas Transportation Commission, Rosenthal remarked that people have died in recent years after being swept away by the waters. He said that in a 2019 storm, 16 of Bexar County's 19 high-water rescues happened on Broadway in Alamo Heights.

Possible solutions will likely include additional box culverts and inlets to help drainage.

Although TxDOT will not be responsible for addressing the flooding, Rosenthal said the agency is a key part of the puzzle needed to complete the project. Without TxDOT, Rosenthal said, there was concern that the city would lose funding that it had secured through entities such as Bexar County, the San Antonio River Authority and the Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization for various parts of the Broadway infrastructure project.

Aside from safety concerns, Rosenthal said there is also "huge potential" for beautification along Broadway if his city pushes forward on working with TxDOT.

"There are cracked sidewalks, power lines everywhere, and businesses aren't inclined to improve their properties because it's in the flood plain," Rosenthal said. "So this should hopefully help with the entire Broadway corridor in Alamo Heights."

The infrastructure project on Broadway would span from downtown San Antonio through Alamo Heights, and for both cities it would have meant wider sidewalks, fewer traffic lanes, protected bike paths and landscaping for more shade.

Rosenthal said in a letter to TxDOT in January that he was "extremely disappointed and baffled with TxDOT's reversal in its commitment to the Broadway project as planned by TxDOT for the past seven years."

Rosenthal said last week that although the city was "shocked" initially at TxDOT's reversal, leaders are now "at peace with the fact that we're not going to

have the lane reduction and will be thrilled to have the ultimate project completed.”

Through discussions with TxDOT, Rosenthal said, “I think as a council we’ve come to appreciate and accept what TxDOT’s rationale is for not reducing lanes — the growth in the population and in Bexar County in particular.”

But San Antonio leaders have not made a similar shift. Mayor Ron Nirenberg said the city is committed to continuing the project he said is outlined in a 2017 bond.

“Our position hasn’t changed,” Nirenberg said in an emailed statement. “The city of San Antonio is hopeful that we can continue to work with TxDOT to fully realize what more than 70 percent of San Antonio voters approved in 2017. We plan to honor the will of the voters.”

Rosenthal said his city’s leadership has worked to keep San Antonio leaders informed about the Alamo Heights decision to move forward with TxDOT.

Rosenthal said TxDOT is in charge of designing and engineering the road and then coordinating with Alamo Heights to design and engineer the amenities that go with the road, such as utility burial, new light signals, sidewalks and landscaping.

TxDOT is in the design phase of working on the stretch of Broadway that runs through Alamo Heights, and TxDOT spokesman Bob Kaufman said a timeline for breaking ground is not firm yet. Even so, he said there were some previously scheduled maintenance improvement projects along Broadway in San Antonio near Interstate 35 that will get started later this spring or in summer.

When pushing for 2020’s \$13.25 million bond for the Austin Highway and lower Broadway project, Alamo Heights leaders had told community members that working on Broadway would mean lane reduction, protected bike lanes, more landscaping and wider sidewalks. Rosenthal said the goal is to move forward with as much of the original plan as possible, just without removing any driving lanes. Rosenthal said obtaining the space needed for things such as wider sidewalks and more landscaping could be possible without losing driving

lanes once the lanes are made to be the proper width. He said some lanes are much wider than they need to be.

Rosenthal said he thinks the bike paths might not end up coming to fruition but that the city will “definitely have bike availability somehow.”

“I don’t think it’s going to look tremendously different, except for an extra lane,” he said.

Lane reductions

Kaufman said the San Antonio and Alamo Heights bonds never explicitly mention lane reductions. But Nirenberg has said in the past that not explicitly mentioning lane reductions in the San Antonio bond language shouldn’t matter.

“The bond language that was produced in 2017 is similar to bond language that has been done since the dawn of time,” he said earlier this year. “It leaves room for the public process in which the project design is approved. In this case, the language is very clear. The amenities such as bicycle and pedestrian access must be included in the roadway in order for it to be a complete street, and the lane configuration would be done appropriately to that.”

Centro San Antonio initiated a traffic study in 2016 by global engineering consulting firm WSP that concluded that lane reduction for the sake of protected bike lanes and wider sidewalks would not cause a congestion problem. Michelle Vigil, a public affairs manager with the city of San Antonio, said that in 2019 the city’s design engineer performed a traffic analysis using the 2016 study. The conclusions from the 2019 update and analysis were in line with the 2016 traffic study, she said.

Kaufman said TxDOT disagrees with the 2016 study’s conclusion that lane reduction shouldn’t be much of a congestion problem.

TxDOT initiated its own traffic study of Broadway in San Antonio and Alamo Heights in February. Kaufman said in an email that the study, which is being performed by national engineering firm Jacobs Engineering, is not complete but should be in the coming weeks.

Kaufman said TxDOT routinely does traffic studies when communities are planning road work and mobility improvements to give planners and engineers an idea of how much traffic could increase over time and “what methods could be considered to meet that added demand.” He said that “it was time” for another study because of the growth projected for the area.

J. Bruce Bugg Jr., chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission, said in an emailed statement that he is happy about the city of Alamo Heights’ decision to move forward with the project without lane reductions.

“We appreciate the unanimous vote from the City of Alamo Heights City Council to support maintaining three lanes of traffic in each direction along Broadway,” Bugg said. “We look forward to continue working with officials” in Alamo Heights and San Antonio “as the important work on Broadway moves forward.”

Kaufman expressed similar sentiments in an email, saying TxDOT is happy that Alamo Heights decided to move forward with three lanes in each direction and is hopeful that San Antonio will also “collaborate at this level so work can start.” megan.rodriquez@express-news.net