

Good morning, I'm Ric Sternberg. I'd like to beg you in advance to pardon my bluntness and long-windedness. I don't come before you often but this time, I've got a lot to say. Thanks for indulging me.

We in the outer reaches of Travis County will probably be fighting back the encroachment of suburban density for the rest of our lives. The powers that be seem to love the idea of a densely populated Hill Country and the infrastructure that fosters it.

A couple of years ago, it was the LCRA water line that we resisted. We lost. The line is in (at least part way). Now road boosters seem to be using the existence of the Hamilton Pool Road water line as part of their justification for enlarging the road to a "4 lane divided arterial".

Initially, in their 2005 plan, CAMPO had planned to simply make safety improvements to the 2 lane road, adding shoulders, etc. Then, Public Works Director Steve Manilla proposed to the Commissioners Court that they request that CAMPO upgrade the plan to a 4 lane, based on traffic projections, etc. for 2030. The current CAMPO plan calls for a 4 lane all the way from 71 to the Blanco County line (which is almost 3 miles west of the Pedernales River).

Today, if I read the proposal correctly, it looks like Mr. Manilla is suggesting that you go back to CAMPO and request that they downgrade the section west of Reimers-Peacock Road (which does not even exist yet) back to a 2 lane "Hill Country Arterial". Well, I guess it is better than nothing. But let's take a look at what that means.

First, there is no realistic justification for the 4 lane at all. The overblown projections could make your head spin. One such projection in Mr. Manilla's memo is "10 vehicle trips per day per housing unit". 10 trips? Gimme a break! Residents would have to spend their days traveling back and forth to Bee Cave to keep up with that projection.

Second, the projected number of housing units is extremely inflated - a developers' fantasy. Here is Sunday's Statesman, saying "the 'burbs no longer beckon". The high price of fuel and downtown explosion have caused an attitude shift. Commuting is becoming uncool.

Third, Mr. Manilla's memo only talks about scaling back the last few miles of the proposed road expansion - not enough. I think it should be left 2 lane all the way from 71. Some people support the idea of a 4 lane from 71 to RR12. Nobody thinks a 4 lane is warranted from 12 to the still non-existent Reimers-Peacock, let alone out to Blanco County.

Fourth (and this is a biggie), here's how Mr. Manilla describes the "reduced" road: "The Hill Country Arterial standard requires 80-feet of right-of-way for the roadway with 40 feet of conservation easement on each side." THAT'S A SWATH 160 FEET WIDE! There are numerous places where that would be impossible. Here's one example. A section of the road between the river and the Westcave Preserve gate spans between a sheer bluff overlooking the river on one side and a rock cliff face, which holds up the edge of the Preserve on the other. The overall width, from the cliff rock to the bluff drop-off is less than 40 feet. It would take great magic to squeeze an 80 foot roadway and 80 feet of conservation easement into those 40 feet.

This whole “hill country arterial” designation is very suspicious. What math justifies 80 feet of right of way for a 2 lane road? We went out and measured the widest road we could find in the area – Highway 71 West, just west of Hamilton Pool Road. There, there are four lanes, each 12’ wide. There is a 9’ median and 8’ shoulders on both sides. That’s a lot of road but it still only totals 73 feet. And here, Mr. Manilla is asking for a two-lane road, presumably with 11 foot lanes and 5 foot shoulders and plunking it down in the middle of an 80 foot wide right of way. Why???

Now, let’s watch a little movie.

A few weeks ago, at around 3:00 on a Friday afternoon, my neighbor John Worrall and I took a little drive from Hamilton Pool to the Travis-Blanco County line – a 3.6 mile stretch. We took it nice and slow, as one should do on a quiet, scenic road. The whole trip took us 10 minutes 41 seconds. We are looking at that trip, sped up by more than 3 times. I just want you to observe three things:

First, look how gorgeous the road is – classic, unspoiled Hill Country – worthy of a Sunday drive just to soak up the scenery.

Second, though you can’t really see any of them, note that all along the way, there are only a few residences.

And Third, have you seen any other vehicles? Well hang on, you will see one, just one. In ten minutes 41 seconds there was only one car on the road besides us. And we wouldn’t have been there except to shoot the video. Kind of makes you wonder about those traffic projections, doesn’t it?

Conclusion:

In my opinion, and one echoed by many of my neighbors, the County and CAMPO are not listening to the real needs of the community. You are being misguided instead by the greedy desires of developers who care not one whit for the Hill Country, except as a potential cash cow.

Projecting high density, then building to meet the overblown projections is nothing more than self-fulfilling prophecy. The philosophy of “build it and they will come” may apply to baseball fields but not our beloved Hill Country.

Save it, don’t pave it!