



IN THIS ISSUE

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NEW-STYLE SAFETY REST AREAS A PLEASANT HAVEN FOR I-35 TRAVELERS WITH ROAD CONTRACTORS, TXDOT BALANCES CONSTRUCTION REQUIREMENTS AND ACCESS NEEDS THANK YOU, SALADO! LANE CLOSURES MILESTONES DOWN THE ROAD

NEW-STYLE SAFETY REST AREAS A PLEASANT HAVEN FOR I-35 TRAVELERS

Weary motorists traveling I-35 — Texas' Main Street highway — will see a number of improvements in the next few years that will make it easier and more pleasant to take a break from driving.

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) will break ground in a few months on two safety rest stop areas along I-35 between Hillsboro and Abbott in Hill County. The new stops — south of Chatt Road and about 25 miles north of Waco — will cost about \$15 million and are scheduled for completion in summer 2013.

Andy Keith, TxDOT's Maintenance Division facilities branch supervisor, says the new facilities — part of TxDOT's overall plan to enhance highway safety — will offer even more enticements than in the past for motorists to stop and rest.

Keith notes that driver fatigue is a major cause of traffic accidents in the state, and that for the last decade, TxDOT has been upgrading rest areas to help offset that problem.

"The goal is to provide a safe place in a pleasant environment that encourages folks to stop and rest," he says. Keith adds that the new facilities are designed to reflect local history.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) research shows 1,500 lives are lost each year and 71,000 people are injured as a result of 100,000 accidents believed to be caused by fatigued drivers.

Since 1999, TxDOT has spent \$157 million replacing older rest areas — most of them built in the 1960s — with state-of-the-art safety rest areas that are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also provide enhanced services for road-weary Texas motorists.

The new-style safety rest areas include amenities such as separate car and truck parking, two sets of men's and women's restrooms, information on weather and road conditions, safety and educational messages, interior exhibits highlighting local history, free Wi-Fi access, security surveillance cameras, an on-site office for law enforcement, walking trails and children's play areas, and vending machines.



CALENDAR

June 1

Exit 360 to FM 1304 and Exit 362 to Chatt Road (HCR 3111) are closed as of June 1. See the Lane Closures section of this issue for more details.

LINKS

My35.org

TxDOT

CONTACT

Jodi Wheatley

I-35 Information Specialist
TxDOT Waco District
100 S. Loop Dr.
Waco, TX 76704
254/867-2836
jodi.wheatley@txdot.gov

“While we are closing some old-style rest areas around the state,” Keith explains, “at the same time we are opening a number of new locations that provide upgraded services for the traveling public.”

The new safety rest areas are placed on long-distance corridors with more than 5,000 vehicles per day. TxDOT has completed 38 of the 88 facilities included in the 1999 plan. Currently, TxDOT has 80 rest areas (both old and new styles) around the state, in addition to 12 Travel Information Centers. More than 50 million people use the safety rest areas annually — about 100 people every minute of every day.

Federal Transportation Enhancement Funds were set aside for most of the new facilities, including the two in Hill County, although projects that bid in July or August of last year were funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

Once the Hill County facilities are complete, old-style rest areas south of Waxahachie and Burleson will be closed.

WITH ROAD CONTRACTORS, TXDOT BALANCES CONSTRUCTION REQUIREMENTS AND ACCESS NEEDS

Road construction is often akin to sausage making. It’s good when it’s cooked, but you really don’t want to see it being made.

Unfortunately, motorists don’t always have a choice if they want a better roadway. Sometimes, they have to experience the downside of road work: lane closures, detours and traffic slowdowns. In the end, though, the benefits usually far outweigh those drawbacks.

“We realize that I-35 is not your typical road construction project, thanks to the tens of thousands of travelers that rely on it each day,” says Duane Schwarz, the Texas Department of Transportation’s (TxDOT’s) director of construction for the Waco District, which has the bulk of the My 35 expansion task. “That’s why TxDOT has implemented provisions for I-35 contractors; we want to make this entire process as hassle free as possible.”

For example, contractors are encouraged to be as efficient as possible when lane closures are under way. “Contractors are always charged an hourly ‘lane-use fee’ for a lane closure, but the rate goes up substantially if a lane is closed during weekday peak hours,” Schwarz says. This lane-use fee encourages contractors to open the lanes back up as soon as possible. “And because there are more travelers on I-35 on weekends, closures are not allowed anytime Friday or Saturday.” If needed, contractors are allowed to conduct a lane closure after 10 p.m. on Sundays, or between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. on week nights. No holiday lane closures are permitted.

During a lane closure, contractors must have safety measures in place, including message boards and a police presence, to keep the public informed and enforce special traffic laws that might be in effect during construction (reduced speeds, for example).

When it comes to the closing of an overpass, underpass, or on and off ramps, contractors are not allowed to close multiple contiguous locations at the same time. At least every other intersection must remain open so drivers can easily get on and off the highway. (There could be exceptions

to this provision if the ramps are close together.)

“In addition to the motorists, the businesses along I-35 are a vital concern for our efforts,” Schwarz explains. “The last thing we want to do is disrupt their livelihoods.”

Contractors know that access to the businesses along the frontage roads of I-35 must be maintained at all times. If a business has two entrances, only one can be closed at a time. In the case of a business having just one entrance, only half of it will be closed during construction to allow customers access to the business through the other half.

Targeted for completion in 2016, the My 35 Expansion Project could possibly be finished earlier, Schwarz says. “Most people don’t realize that contractors have a financial incentive to complete their project early,” he says.

The My 35 Expansion Project, which runs from the Williamson County line in the south to the city of Hillsboro in the north, began in 2005. So far, five separate projects have been completed. Four other projects are currently under construction, one has gone to contract, four others will be contracted in the near future, and the last two are in the planning stage.

THANK YOU, SALADO!

Thanks go to the Salado Lions Club and Salado Rotary Club, both of whom invited Jodi Wheatley, I-35 information specialist for the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) Waco District, to give a presentation on the I-35 expansion to their members in May.

“I met a bunch of really nice people (some of them twice!) and had a great time with each group,” says Wheatley.

If you have a group you’d like to schedule a presentation for, please contact Wheatley through this newsletter. Besides providing information on the I-35 expansion, she can also present on highway funding and how it happens in Texas. And if you’re interested in something a little more technical, Wheatley can have a TxDOT engineer come with her and answer any questions you have.

LANE CLOSURES

SECTION 1C: SALADO TO BELTON (FM 2484 TO US 190 IN BELTON)

- The Connell Street exit ramp from US 190 W (first exit after entering US 190 from southbound I-35) has been permanently closed to allow construction of the new flyover connecting I-35 northbound to US 190 W.
- The inside lane of the US 190 W access road from I-35 to Connell Street is closed to allow construction of flyover support columns.

[View this section's schematic.](#)

SECTION 5A: WACO TO WEST (N. LOOP 340 TO

FM 1858)

- I-35 northbound Exit 342B will be closed for 12 to 18 months as work progresses at the US 77/I-35 interchange. Exit 342A (Crest Drive/FM 2417) will be open.

SECTION 5C: ABBOTT TO SOUTH OF HILLSBORO (FM 1304 TO FM 310)

- FM 1304 is completely closed and FM 310 is partially closed (one lane in each direction) under I-35 overpasses while cross streets are being rebuilt and turnarounds added. FM 1304 will be partially opened ASAP to allow one lane of travel in each direction.
- Exit 360 to FM 1304 is closed for the duration of construction in this area (possibly several years). Traffic will use Exit 358 (FM 1242 at Abbott) to access FM 1304 until a temporary exit ramp is built (expected to be completed by June 17).
- Exit 362 to Chatt Road (HCR 3111) is closed until new exit and entrance ramps are constructed. Traffic will use Exit 358 (FM 1242 at Abbott) to access Chatt Road during the closure or the temporary exit ramp at FM 1304 after June 17.

MILESTONES

SECTION 1C: SALADO TO BELTON (FM 2484 TO US 190/FM 436)

The road base for Rose Lane's new connection to Amity Road is completed, as is the northbound mainlane bridge deck over the Lampasas River. Work on the columns for the US 190 flyover has begun, and the road base for the new northbound frontage road near Amity Road has been laid.

[View this section's schematic.](#)

SECTION 3C: HEWITT TO WACO (FM 2063/SUN VALLEY BOULEVARD TO S. LOOP 340)

The road base has been laid for the northbound lanes and the concrete paving poured on a section of the flyover above I-35 mainlanes.

SECTION 5A: WACO TO WEST (N. LOOP 340 TO FM 1858/TOKIO ROAD)

Paving of the southbound frontage road from BUS 77 to N. Loop 340 and the northbound frontage road from N. Loop 340 to BUS 77 has begun. Retaining walls at Meyers Lane are under construction.

SECTION 5C: ABBOTT TO HILLSBORO (FM 1304 TO FM 310)

The northbound frontage road opened June 1, and the road base has

been laid for the southbound frontage road. Northbound and southbound frontage-road bridge decks over Cobb Creek and railing on the northbound bridge are poured.

DOWN THE ROAD

SECTION 1C: SALADO TO BELTON (FM 2484 TO US 190/FM 436)

Construction will begin on the northbound frontage road from FM 2484 to Shanklin Road. Southbound traffic at Tahuaya Road will shift over to allow construction work at the crossover. The new Rose Lane connection to Amity Road will be completed.

[View this section's schematic.](#)

SECTION 3C: HEWITT TO WACO (FM 2063/SUN VALLEY BOULEVARD TO S. LOOP 340)

Construction will continue on the flyover, the new northbound mainlanes and the new crossover near Waco Memorial Park.

SECTION 5A: WACO TO WEST (N. LOOP 340 TO FM 1858/TOKIO ROAD)

Construction will continue on overpasses at BUS 77, Hilltop Road/Old Dallas Highway and FM 1858/Tokio Road. Paving of the frontage roads from BUS 77 to N. Loop 340 will continue, requiring some nighttime lane closures. Construction will begin on the overpasses over the Union Pacific railroad tracks and Pecan Lane.

SECTION 5C: ABBOTT TO HILLSBORO (FM 1304 TO FM 310)

Traffic will shift to the new one-way, northbound frontage road. (The current west-side frontage road remains two-way for now.) The contractor will begin removing the old east-side frontage road and laying asphalt on the new southbound frontage road. Pavement on the northbound mainlanes and the retaining wall at FM 310 will be repaired, requiring nighttime lane closures. FM 1304 under I-35 will be opened in part with one lane in each direction, with completion expected in July.

For more information or to have your email address added to the I-35 information distribution list, please send your request to Jodi.Wheatley@txdot.gov.