

# Bastrop County green lights its new transportation plan

By Mary Huber

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Upper Elgin River Road between Central Avenue and FM 969 in Bastrop County is a winding stretch of twists and curves connecting Webberville to Elgin. Between 2010 and 2015, there were 37 crashes on that 10-mile stretch of roadway, according to Texas Department of Transportation data.

It's that statistic that puts a plan to straighten and realign the road at No. 4 on a list of 29 priority projects included in Bastrop County's new transportation master plan, which commissioners adopted Tuesday.



Johnson

Other projects include improvements like a hike-and-bike trail in Paige, a road that would connect the Pine Canyon and La Reata subdivisions and three new bridges to span the Colorado River for a grand total of \$90 million in county infrastructure upgrades.

Those 29 projects are just one portion of the 212-page master plan, which was commissioned by the county in 2015. But it's one of the most important aspects of the plan, according to County Engineer Carolyn Dill, who said that having the list will allow Bastrop County to compete for its share of federal dollars from the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"When money becomes available

from the feds for transportation projects, if we don't have a plan that has a list of projects then we're really not in a position to submit anything or compete for some of that money," Dill said. "You can't even get into the running unless you have a plan."

Compiling the project list was a collaborative effort among various transportation officials, who weighed feedback they received from public input sessions across Bastrop, Elgin and Smithville this year.

While many residents complained about traffic buildup on Texas 71 and U.S. 290, or congestion on Chestnut Street through Bastrop, or poor sidewalks in Elgin, Dill said the priority projects were limited to work on county thoroughfares. Those other projects will be deferred to the cities and the state, she said.

"We kept it more local," Dill said. "We feel like TxDOT in their planning process will take care of that."

TxDOT has begun constructing overpasses at various intersections along Texas 71 and has plans to widen U.S. 290 to a four-lane highway in the coming years.

But Dill said the county projects will have regional impact, too. New roads and bridges that increase connectivity throughout the county will reduce some of the congestion on its major thoroughfares, she said.

None of the projects identified has been financed so far and are merely in their planning stages. The county

will submit a handful of road projects when CAMPO puts out its next call for projects in 2017.

CAMPO Executive Director Ashby Johnson said Bastrop County's transportation plan would go before his agency's board in January for approval and would eventually be included in the 2045 long-range plan for Central Texas.

In addition to the 29 projects identified, the transportation plan also includes an inventory of all the assets in the county – such as roads, signs and culverts – and their condition. Alliance Transportation Group, which compiled the plan, drove vans loaded with cameras down every road in the region to take photos of streets and signs to determine if their condition is poor, fair or good.

"We know the condition of all of our roadways and can use that then to make decisions for maintenance upgrades," Dill said.

The asset inventory was conducted before the Halloween 2015 floods. Since then, flooding rains have increased damage on the county's unpaved roads.

The plan, which will be made available on the county's website, was paid for with a \$450,000 CAMPO grant.

Consultants from Alliance Transportation Group worked concurrently with the city of Bastrop on its new transportation master plan. The city's plan is expected to be released this month.

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# Hamner, Meuth sworn in as newest county commissioners

By Mary Huber

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Two new Bastrop County commissioners were sworn into office Sunday – Mel Hamner at a service at the courthouse annex and Mark Meuth at District Judge Chris Duggan's home.

Hamner replaced outgoing Precinct 1 Commissioner Willie Piña, who served at his post for eight years, and Meuth replaced John Klaus, who after 12 years as Precinct 3 Commissioner decided against seeking re-election.

Hamner, a Republican, and Meuth, a Democrat, were elected in November and officially started their new positions Tuesday.

As county commissioners, they will be responsible for building and maintaining county roads within their precincts and will serve on the Commissioners Court, which sets policy and the budget and tax rate for the county.

Hamner, a former U.S. Air Force logistics planner, will represent Precinct 1, which encompasses the city of Bastrop and central Bastrop County. Meuth, who worked for the Texas Department of Transportation for 29 years, will represent Precinct 3, made up of southwestern Bastrop County, including Cedar Creek, Rockne and Red Rock.

As the two men took office Sunday, both vowed to repair the crumbling roads and bridges in their respective precincts. Repeated disasters, including four major floods and a fire in the span of a year, have damaged the delicate infrastructure of the county, the new commissioners said.

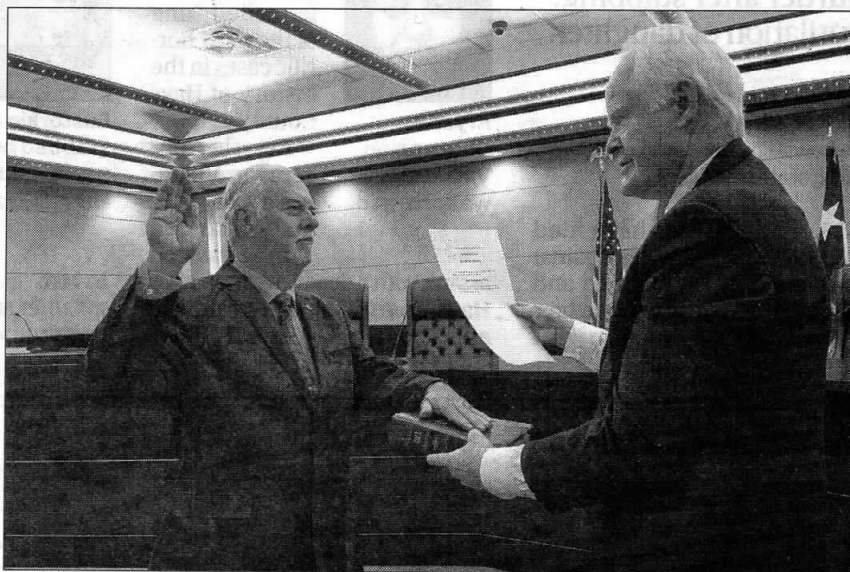
Hamner met his road and bridge crew at 6:45 a.m. Tuesday to begin work. Both he and Meuth planned to drive down every road in their precincts, to assess troubled spots and begin prioritizing projects.

Hamner said he had been briefed on at least 16 work sites from previous disasters that still need repair. However, his top priority will be to fill the vacant positions on his road crew – there are three open positions.

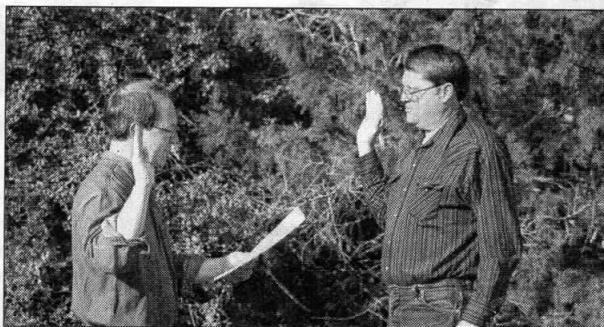
"I have to fill the vacancies on the road crew so we can even do our job," Hamner said.

Some Federal Emergency Management Agency funds from the 2015 Memorial Day weekend flood event are beginning to trickle into the county coffers, Hamner said. He said will be working with emergency officials in the county to better understand how to work within the federal system and continue making repairs.

Both Hamner and Meuth will receive training in Austin from the Texas Association of County Commissioners begin-



Bastrop County Judge Paul Pape swears in new Precinct 1 Commissioner Mel Hamner on Sunday at the Bastrop County Courthouse Annex. CONTRIBUTED



District Judge Christopher Duggan swears in new Precinct 3 Commissioner Mark Meuth at his private home Sunday.

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ning Tuesday. Hamner said he has been briefed by several county officials but will spend the early weeks on the job learning the ins and outs of the budget, which for fiscal year 2016-17 was approved in September.

The county is also looking to adopt its five-year capital improvement plan, which will come before commissioners for approval Monday. It lays out several facilities upgrades, including a new judicial court complex and law enforcement administration building and a top-of-the-line emergency management and communications center.

"To stay ahead of the growth that is coming, we do need to do those items," Hamner said Sunday. "I just have to figure out how we are going to fund it."

The county plans to issue certificate of obligation bonds (loans that do not require voter approval), totaling \$2 million every two years to pay for the improvements, according to the improvement plan.

Officials delayed voting on the plan at their last meeting to wait for the new commissioners to take office.

They did, however, approve on Dec. 27 the county's new transportation

master plan, which lays out major road projects that will go before the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization for funding in the coming years.

In addition to road and transportation infrastructure work, Hamner said he is focused on bringing more recreation options to the county. He also said he hopes to bring portable bus stations to the Lake Bastrop Acres neighborhood along Texas 95, where he said kids often have to wait for the bus in the dark.

He plans to create his own five-year plan for Precinct 1, including road and bridge work, which he said he will make available online.

Hamner defeated outgoing Commissioner Willie Piña in the Republican primary runoff in May, to face off against Democrat Dock Jackson, a former Bastrop City Council member, in the general election. He won by a comfortable 16 percent margin.

Meuth won against Republican Colton Stabeno, the county's conservation habitat planner, in a close race by 205 votes.

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# Judge Pape optimistic about county's 2017

By Andy Sevilla

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As he looks back on 2016, Bastrop County Judge Paul Pape said he is proud of the work commissioners have done to help the county recover from several natural disasters, lower taxes and build infrastructure to meet the needs of a growing community.



Pape

But despite achieving several milestones last year – building new county annex buildings in Smithville and Elgin; progress on projects funded by U.S. Housing and Urban Development grants; and construction of

a \$2.5 million communications tower north of Smithville – the county faced challenges that will roll over to 2017.

“My biggest disappointment for the year is that we are not able to more quickly complete repairs to county roadways destroyed by flooding in 2015 and 2016,” Pape said.

Over the past 18 months, Bastrop County has been hit with four major floods and a wildfire that burned close to 4,600 acres north of Smithville and destroyed 64 homes.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency “has been a responsive partner in multiple recovery efforts on our behalf,” Pape said. “But, the wheels of federal government turn very slowly. As a result, we still have public roadways barricaded and impassible. County park assets are awaiting approval for demolition and reconstruction.”

And though delay may be frustrating, it’s part of the process, Pape said.

“I only ask our citizens to be patient with us as we work with FEMA and state agencies to get these repairs done,” Pape said. “In most cases, we can save local taxpayers three-fourths of the costs by waiting.”

The combination of floods and fires

has created logjams in miles of creeks and tributaries throughout the county, Pape said. The Office of Emergency Management has surveyed some of the damage with drone-mounted cameras and found that floods with continue to be a problem unless those impediments are cleared, he said.

The county has completed a \$3 million erosion-control and soil-stabilization project along hundreds of miles of county roadways, Pape said. Bastrop, Elgin and Smithville have also accepted \$1.5 million each in federal funding to construct or expand and improve emergency shelters in each city that will double as community and recreation centers.

The county is also building an emergency shelter on property leased from Bastrop at Mayfest Park that will double as a community center and house the Bastrop County Long Term Recovery Team and Texas A&M Agri-Life Extension Service, including 4-H and Future Farmers of America activities near the city’s rodeo arena.

As a continued push to improve safety and mobility during disasters, the county is working on tow ingress and egress projects to provide alternative escape routes and improve the general flow of traffic. The north project will serve residents of Squirrel Run and Pine Ridge Farms along Texas 21 East, and the south project will open a new route for the Tahitian Village, Pine Forest and Colovista subdivisions out to Texas 71. The projects have been designed and engineered and are awaiting environmental clearances, Pape said.

The county is also continuing its work on fire protection. The final design was approved and site clearing is beginning for a new fire station for Emergency Services District No. 2 on Texas 95 near Pershing Drive. The \$4 million facility will improve fire protection services in the north-central area of the county, Pape said. The county’s fire-fuels mitigation program is going full steam ahead as FEMA has offered an additional \$1

million to expand it. The original \$4 million project was designed to treat 4,000 acres of at-risk forest to reduce impacts of wildfire. With the Tahitian Village area now complete, crews are now working along FM 1441.

Last month, commissioners approved a new transportation plan for the county that will position it to benefit from state and federal transportation funding. It also addresses safety, resiliency and connectivity issues on county roads, Pape said.

Among the county’s biggest successes in 2016, Pape said the greatest one is lowering the property tax rate below 60 cents per \$100 property valuation. The 59.9-cent tax rate is the lowest for Bastrop County since 2002.

The proudest moment for Pape was honoring the survivors of the 2011 Bastrop County Complex Fire at a special service Sept. 4 commemorating the fifth anniversary of the most destructive wildfire in the state’s history.

“It was a special service, with deep-rooted meaning for the entire community,” Pape said.

With all the successes and disappointments in Bastrop County in 2016, Pape said he looks to the new year with optimism and passion to address coming challenges.

He said with the growth the county is experiencing there will also be added demand on law enforcement, development services, animal control and transportation infrastructure. He also expects a call for more residential and commercial development and improved parks to increase the community’s quality of life.

“We have a great team of elected officials supported by some very dedicated professionals,” Pape said. “Everyone understands the mission and is dedicated to doing their part as we work to recover from disasters and make Bastrop County more resilient for the future.”

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# Mayor: Bastrop met its goals; flooding was biggest challenge

By Andy Sevilla

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As Bastrop Mayor Ken Kesselus reflects on 2016, he said the City Council accomplished everything it set out to do last year and met most of the challenges faced by city leadership and staff.

Kesselus said the city's biggest challenge last year was the flooding of dozens of homes in May caused by record rainfall and poor planning in previous decades.

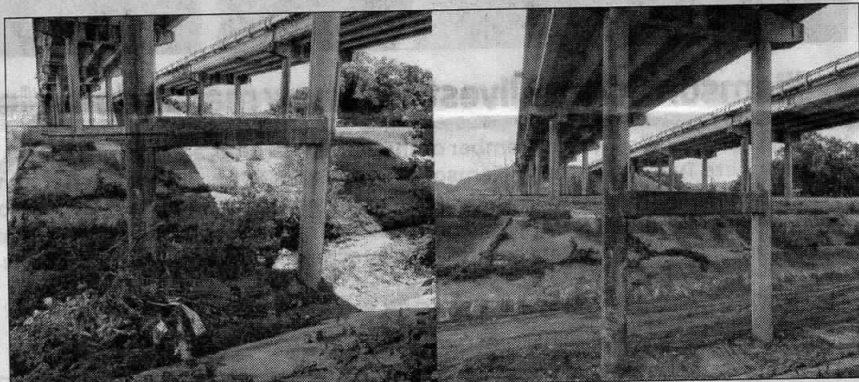
More than 6 inches of rain fell in Bastrop in just two hours on May 27, turning streets into roaring rivers and flooding homes throughout the city. At least 77 homes suffered damage within the city limits, officials said, many concentrated along Gills Branch, a dry creek that snakes through town.

That creek had not been maintained and sat filled with trees, trash and debris and became overwhelmed with water by drains that feed into it during heavy rains.

Council Member Willie DeLaRosa said in July that Gills Branch had never been a priority for the city and nothing had ever been done to control its flooding.



Kesselus



Public Works crews cleared out trees and debris in Gills Branch over the summer after the May 27 flooding. That creek had not been maintained and became overwhelmed with water by drains that feed into it during heavy rains.



Bastrop Council Member Kay McAnally (left) resigned from council in October, saying that the council was chaotic and confused under the direction of Mayor Ken Kesselus (right).

PHOTOS BY MARY HUBER/  
BASTROP ADVERTISER

Dozens of residents affected by flooding in May called on the city to fix its drainage and clean and clear Gills Branch.

The council made drainage a priority in the 2016-17 fiscal year, allocating funds to purchase equipment to help maintain Gills Branch. City crews cleared trash, trees and debris from the dry creek in July.

Kesselus said the city also implemented Form Base Code – a land development regulation – in the downtown area; completed a 20-year comprehensive plan; decided on plans and location for a multipurpose building that will serve as an emergency shelter during disasters; began broadcasting council and other meetings on TV and its website; received a summary ruling from a district judge in favor of the city and other taxing entities stating they had the rights to Pine Forest Unit 6 (undeveloped plots of land in and outside the city limits near Tahitian Village); won a legal battle to obtain a permit to pump 2,000 acre feet of groundwater at XS Ranch; completed \$400,000 worth of street maintenance projects; and installed a new water filtration system at the Willow water treatment plant.

Kesselus said the city is saving a lot of taxpayer money as a result of hiring David Bragg to serve as the city's attorney after J.C. Brown resigned in July. He said the average monthly legal charges over the past 15 months went from \$32,837 with Brown to \$4,631 with Bragg.

Bragg was recently appointed as the city's attorney in a hotly contested vote

in November and his contract approved in December after having served as interim city attorney since August.

Kesselus said the city also celebrated the completion of the Arts Guild building on Chestnut Street, as well as the completion of an overpass on Texas 71 at Tahitian Drive.

For Kesselus, his proudest moment for the city last year was when voters rejected three of five amendments to the city's charter in November calling for lowered signature requirements for recalls, referenda and initiatives – all the ways residents could force a vote on legislative action or the removal of elected officials.

Voters approved two charter amendments requiring that signatures to call for initiatives and referenda be collected within 180 days – a standard rule absent from the city charter.

The political action committee Independent Texans run by Linda Curtis – who lives in the city's extraterritorial jurisdiction, and therefore is not eligible to vote in city elections – turned in 337 signatures to the city secretary Aug. 1, therefore forcing council members to call a charter election in November.

Curtis had sought to recall Kesselus after she accused him of ethics violations, including the possible appointment of his then-boss to the Bastrop Economic Development Corp.

Kesselus called Curtis' allegations unfounded and told the Advertiser he never attempted to appoint his boss to the board. The application for a spot on the Bastrop Economic Development

Corp. was pulled before the council took up the matter.

Kesselus said his biggest discouragement this year was discord within the City Council, which boiled over when Council Member Kay McNally resigned in October after she claimed that council members often skirt rules and said she no longer wanted to be a part of that. McNally rescinded her resignation later that month saying she didn't want the city to incur the cost of calling for an election to replace her.

“Unfortunately, political tensions – some manufactured and some warranted – sometimes overshadowed the many successes of a very productive year,” he said.

Kesselus said challenges still exist for the city in 2017 – such as hiring a city manager, managing growth effectively, providing for the needs of a larger city while retaining the values of its small-town heritage, establishing a Destination Marketing Organization to replace the Bastrop Marketing Corp., improving drainage and aging infrastructure, and keeping an eye on a suit filed by residents opposing the groundwater permit the city recently received – but remains optimistic and hopeful for Bastrop in the new year.

“Currently, the City Council and mayor are working together very effectively, with each member committed to serving our residents to the best of her or his ability,” Kesselus said.

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