

Manor Expressway: Oh, the Vehicle Miles You'll Travel!

The **Manor Expressway**, now projected to cost more than \$623 million, received a \$31.6 million loan from the State Infrastructure Bank last week. The loan to the **Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority** is a stop-gap measure; the 6.1-mile toll road will be funded primarily through the sale of toll revenue bonds, but they have yet to be sold. The loan will allow construction to start on an initial 1.4-mile segment between U.S. 183 and Springdale Road. The project also includes nontolled frontage roads and a bicycle and pedestrian trail. To ease traffic congestion, the first segment plus a new 183 flyover interchange (to start later this year) are scheduled to open by 2013; the two projects alone cost \$245 million. Ultimately the Manor Expressway toll road will intersect with the SH 130 toll road, linking the ever-sprawling metro area to Central Austin.

Meanwhile, the proposed **Green Line** commuter rail transit for the same Elgin-Manor-Austin corridor isn't moving forward – a political casualty, at least for now, of **Capital Metro's** failure to open the Red Line from Downtown Austin to Leander. Adding the Green Line was cited last year by the Transit Working Group (now inactive) of the **Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization** as an effective long-term strategy to reduce the region's vehicle miles traveled (VMT) –

and thereby reduce Central Texans' cost of living, air pollution, and greenhouse-gas emissions. The Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, which also operates the 183A toll road in Williamson County, says that by moving cars more quickly, the Manor Expressway also will cut vehicle emissions and fuel consumption.

Travis County Commissioner **Sarah Eckhardt** disagrees. Via e-mail, she said: "Making mostly single-occupant car commutes from farther away more convenient = higher per-capita VMT. Although it could have been mitigated, the current plan for the 290E toll road will act like MiracleGro on per-capita VMT – no dedicated bus lane, no HOV [high-occupancy vehicle] incentive, no contribution to Manor/Elgin rail which exists within the same corridor, no plan for park-and-ride, no near-term plan for congestion pricing. While CAMPO paid lip service to such mitigating policies with regard to toll roads (the unanimously adopted "toll road covenants"), CAMPO flaked at the first opportunity in failing to require VMT-reducing elements on the 290E toll project." – *Katherine Gregor*



District Court Judge Darlene Byrne (r) greets Lamont Fisher and his daughter, Tiana, at a June 24 open house for two new Travis County offices – one representing children and the other representing parents. The new departments, which represent families involved in Child Protective Services court cases, draw initial funding from a three-year grant from the Court Improvement Program of the Texas Supreme Court. Leslie Hill heads the child representation office, while Stephanie Smith Ledesma leads the office representing parents.

Ott Tackles Austin's Racial Divide

At a June 26 PeopleTalk luncheon, City Manager **Marc Ott** addressed a range of topics – the city budget, affordable housing, small businesses and job creation, Austin's growth and the comprehensive plan – and companionably tag-teamed with City Council Member **Randi Shade** in fielding questions from the audience. But in closing, Ott issued a strong challenge to Austinites to publicly address the racial divide in Austin. "In my 27 years in this business, and in all the places I've been, I've never seen as hard a demographic line," he said, referring to the racial barrier embodied by I-35. "Why is East Austin sequestered?" As Austin's first African-American city manager, he said when he has raised the issue, "people's expressions changed. They found polite ways to change the subject."

The biannual **PeopleTalk Speaker Series** is presented by **PeopleFund**, a non-profit dedicated to improving economic

opportunity, particularly on the Eastside. "Are we what we say we are, given our heightened level of sophisticated sensibilities?" Ott asked, gently provoking the progressives eating pizza at the Alamo Draffhouse South Lamar. "We don't want to talk about it."

The city manager then asserted with some heat: "Well, I intend to talk about it! And I intend to do something about it." After describing "you need not apply" racial discrimination that he personally encountered early in his career, he said that now, as Austin's city manager, he believes he's finally in the right place, at the right time, to speak out. "I'm not going to be silent about it. And to the extent that I can redirect resources to do something about it, I will." Gesturing toward Shade, he added, "The only way I'm going to stop is if the seven of them stop me!" He received enthusiastic applause. – *K.G.*

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