

**Virtual Public Meeting With In-Person Option
April 7, 2021**

**US 281 (Military Highway)
From FM 732 to FM 1421
CSJs: 0220-04-049 & 0220-04-050
Cameron County, Texas**

Narrated by [insert name here]

SLIDE 1 – Welcome

Hello, and welcome to the virtual public meeting for proposed improvements to US 281 (Military Highway) from FM 732 to FM 1421 in Cameron County, Texas. My name is [insert name] representing the Texas Department of Transportation, or TxDOT. This virtual public meeting has been pre-recorded.

Thank you for participating in this virtual public meeting. Public participation is important in the transportation planning process, and TxDOT appreciates your input on the proposed project.

SLIDE 2 – Virtual Public Hearing in Response to Public Health

Given the unique circumstance of the COVID-19 outbreak, along with our commitment to protecting public health during this national emergency, TxDOT is conducting this public meeting virtually and providing an in-person option. All project information can be found on the TxDOT website at www.txdot.gov, keyword search “US 281 Military Highway.” The information provided during this virtual public meeting and on the TxDOT website is the same information that will be provided during the in-person meeting option. Please note that the in-person meeting is being held on Thursday, April 8, 2021, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the TxDOT San Benito Area Office by appointment only. For more information on how to schedule an appointment for the in-person meeting, please call (956) 702-6339 between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

In recognition of COVID-19, enhanced safety measures will be applied at the in-person meeting option, including a requirement to wear a face mask, submit to a temperature check prior to entry, have an appointment, and follow social distancing practices. If anyone arrives without an appointment, they may be asked to wait outside to ensure we maintain appropriate occupancy within the meeting room.

Following the virtual public meeting, the presentation will remain available on the TxDOT website until Thursday, April 22, 2021, at 5 p.m.

SLIDE 3 – Memorandum of Understanding

The proposed project is anticipated to be programmed with both state and federal funds. Because of this, TxDOT is required to assess the potential environmental effects of the proposed project in accordance with federal standards. The process that is followed is called the National Environmental Policy Act process, otherwise known as NEPA. The NEPA process provides analyses of the potential impacts to the natural and manmade environment and

helps the decision maker to make an informed decision on whether to proceed with the project. On December 9, 2019, TxDOT received a signed Memorandum of Understanding from the Federal Highway Administration that permits TxDOT to assume responsibility from the Federal Highway Administration for reviewing and approving certain assigned NEPA projects. This review and approval process applies to this project.

SLIDE 4 – Public Meeting Agenda

This virtual public meeting will include the following topics of discussion: the purpose of the public meeting; the project limits; the need for and purpose of the proposed improvements; a description of the proposed project; a description of the environmental studies being prepared; a description of the right-of-way acquisition process; the next steps in project development; and how to provide comments.

SLIDE 5 – Public Meeting Purpose

The purpose of this virtual public meeting is to encourage and maintain effective communication with the public and provide project-specific information as it relates to the US 281 (Military Highway) project in Cameron County.

Your input and comments are an important part of this process, and we encourage you to provide comments on this project. As I mentioned earlier, your continued participation throughout the planning and development of this project is very important. You are encouraged to talk to your neighbors and refer them to TxDOT so they can also make comments and be included in this process.

SLIDE 6 – Project Limits

This project is in Cameron County and traverses the limits of Brownsville, San Pedro, Encantada-Ranchito El Calaboz, and La Paloma. The project is located just south of the limits of San Benito and crosses portions of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. The proposed project would reconstruct and widen US 281 (Military Highway) from approximately 0.3 miles west of FM 732 to 0.18 miles west of FM 1421 from a two-lane to a four-lane rural highway with a left-turn lane and shoulders.

The project is approximately 5.8 miles in length, and the estimated construction cost is approximately \$24.5 million. The proposed project would be constructed in phases. The approximate limits of the first phase are from FM 1421 to FM 1577, and the limits of the second phase are from FM 1577 to FM 732.

The map included on this slide shows the general vicinity of the proposed project.

SLIDE 7 – Project Need and Purpose

As the population of the project area and surrounding region have continued to increase, so have traffic volumes and resulting congestion. In turn, mobility along this stretch of US 281 (Military Highway) as well as the operational efficiency of the roadway have decreased. The purpose of the project is to improve mobility and increase operational efficiency by constructing additional travel lanes and making operational improvements, such as constructing left-turn lanes and shoulders. The proposed project would also help to ensure the capacity of US 281 (Military Highway), which serves as a designated Hurricane Evacuation

Route, is sufficient to support fleeing residents and associated emergency services during extreme weather events.

SLIDE 8 – Proposed Project Description

The proposed project would reconstruct and widen the existing two-lane roadway to a four-lane rural highway with two 12-foot travel lanes in each direction. A 14-foot left-turn lane would be constructed at various locations within the project limits, and 8-foot shoulders would be constructed along both sides of the roadway. The project would also include construction of wildlife crossings adjacent to the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. The improvements would be constructed within a proposed right of way that would vary from 121 to 146 feet in width and would require approximately 3.1 acres of new right of way. Drainage within the project area would be a roadside open ditch with equalizer culverts beneath the roadway. The equalizer culverts would help to maintain a balance of water on either side of the roadway and prevent overflow onto the roadway.

SLIDE 9 – Environmental Documentation

Since the proposed project would utilize state and federal funds, it is required to adhere to the National Environmental Policy Act. NEPA requires analysis of potential impacts to the human and natural environment as a result of the proposed project.

As part of the environmental process, technical analyses are being completed to document the potential environmental impacts of the proposed project. The resource categories under study include:

- Biological resources, including threatened and endangered species and their habitats;
- Water resources, including waters of the U.S. and wetlands;
- Cultural resources, including historic and archeological resources;
- Hazardous materials;
- Traffic noise;
- Community resources;
- Air quality; and
- Parklands protected under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act

The results of these studies will be available once the analyses are completed. The proposed project is expected to be processed as an open-ended (d)-list Categorical Exclusion. All environmental documentation will be developed in accordance with NEPA, TxDOT, and FHWA standards.

The technical reports will be available for download on the TxDOT website once completed at www.txdot.gov, keyword search “US 281 Military Highway.”

SLIDE 10 – Environmental Documentation

The proposed project would require approximately 3.1 acres of new right of way. Potential displacements include two outbuildings, or carports, and two commercial structures. No residential displacements are anticipated because of the proposed improvements. Also, the proposed project is expected to require a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Section 404 Permit with a Pre-construction Notification.

SLIDE 11 – Environmental Documentation

The proposed project would require the acquisition of approximately 0.07 acres of right of way from Don Jose Esparza Park. The right of way to be acquired is located adjacent to the existing right of way of US 281 (Military Highway), and no recreational structures associated with the park would be impacted. This small community park is maintained by Cameron County and is located at the intersection of FM 1577 with US 281 (Military Highway). TxDOT anticipates making a *de minimis* determination under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 regarding the impacts of the project on the park property. A Section 4(f) *de minimis* finding means that the proposed project would not adversely affect the activities, features, or attributes that qualify the park for protection under Section 4(f). Cameron County and TxDOT will consider comments received during the environmental process before making a final Section 4(f) *de minimis* determination. Public comments on the effects of the proposed project on the activities, features, or attributes of Don Jose Esparza Park may be submitted as described at the end of this presentation.

SLIDE 12 – Right-of-Way Acquisition Process

Property acquisitions will follow federal and state laws and policies. The Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisitions Policy Act of 1970 (or The Uniform Act) is the federal law that is followed for appraisals, negotiations, and relocation of families or businesses. Right-of-Way Brochures are available on the TxDOT Website at <http://txdot.gov/inside-txdot/forms-publications/publications/landowner-rights.html>

Information about the benefits, services, and Right-of-Way Acquisition schedule can be obtained by calling the TxDOT District Office at (956) 702-6287.

SLIDE 13 – Anticipated Next Steps

The schematic for both phases of the project was completed in Summer 2020. Currently, TxDOT is conducting the environmental documentation and public involvement processes for both phases in compliance with NEPA. Public involvement will continue throughout the environmental documentation process, and environmental clearance for both phases is expected in Summer 2022. Final design for the first phase of the project from FM 1421 to FM 1577 is expected to be completed in Spring 2023, followed by right-of-way acquisition and utilities coordination in Spring 2027. The first phase will let, or be open to contractors for bidding, in Summer 2027, and construction is expected to begin in Fall 2027. The schedule for the second phase of the project from FM 1577 to FM 732 will follow the same process from final design through the beginning of construction, the dates of which are still to be determined.

SLIDE 14 – How to Provide Comments

Written comments from the public regarding the proposed project are requested and may be submitted via email to Atidio.Garza@txdot.gov; or via mail by filling out a comment card available on the project website and sending to the TxDOT Pharr District Office, Attention: Pharr District Engineer, 600 W. I-2, Pharr, Texas 78577. You can also return a comment card via email to Atidio.Garza@txdot.gov. Verbal comments can also be submitted by calling (956) 275-1010 to leave a voicemail. All comments must be received on or before Friday, April 23, 2021, to be included in the official meeting documentation. Responses to comments received

will be available online at www.txdot.gov, keyword search: "US 281 Military Highway" once they have been prepared.

If you have any general questions or concerns regarding the proposed project or virtual meeting or in-person option, please contact Atidio "Rudy" Garza, P.E., Project Manager, at (956) 702-6339 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. or at Atidio.Garza@txdot.gov.

SLIDE 15 – Conclusion of Virtual Public Meeting

Thank you for your participation in the US 281 (Military Highway) Virtual Public Meeting. Please remember to submit your comments by Friday, April 23, 2021.