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## Agua should drop legal threat

**Express-News Editorial Board -**

Web Posted: 05/11/2010 4:54 CDT

The Alamo Regional Mobility Authority is engaging in some highway diplomacy. Rather than allowing plans for road construction in the U.S. 281-Loop 1604 corridor to get bogged down in challenges, the RMA is bringing potential adversaries to the table and making them part of the development process.

The RMA has created community advisory committees for both of the two major highway projects it is managing — a 7.9-mile segment of U.S. 281 north of Loop 1604 to the county line and a 37-mile stretch of Loop 1604 from Interstate 35 North to Highway 90 West.

Among the stakeholders on these committees are representatives of homeowners associations, school districts and the business and development community.

The RMA has also included groups with which it has traditionally had an adversarial relationship: the Alamo Sierra Club, Aquifer Guardians in Urban Areas, Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, San Antonio Toll Party and Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom.

This diplomatic approach is a wise one. A good faith effort by members of the advisory groups can streamline the process for road construction and avoid lawsuits and political challenges that are both costly and time consuming. Money and time are resources that are in short supply in addressing traffic problems on San Antonio's fast-growing North and Northwest sides.

But there's a legitimate question about whether at least one of these groups is in fact operating in good faith. The Austin-based Save Our Springs Alliance, representing the Aquifer Guardians in Urban Areas, has threatened to file suit to stop long-needed improvements to the interchange at U.S. 281 and Loop 1604. The basis for the AGUA challenge is the presence of endangered cave invertebrates — insects — in karst features over the Edwards Aquifer.

The nearest habitat, however, is one half-mile from the interchange and at least 1,000 feet from the closest right of way anywhere on Loop 1604. The highways — and the traffic — are already there. The four proposed direct connectors do nothing to threaten the cave invertebrates. And the RMA has proposed a number of environmental measures that will actually improve aquifer protection in the area.

A legal challenge could put \$80 million in federal stimulus funds at risk. Those funds, if lost, would kill this non-tolled project.

5/12/2010


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The lawsuit is a bad move on the merits. As a public relations issue, it's even worse. Residents of the area need and deserve relief from road congestion. Using a dubious case to delay construction of the U.S. 281-Loop 1604 connectors is a sure way to generate a public backlash.

The RMA created the dialogue with stakeholders to avoid situations such as this. AGUA, which is part of that dialogue, should stop the unreasonable threats and sit down for a reasonable discussion.

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