

## **Henderson, Rusk County Sign Interlocal Agreement For Loop 571 Development**

By BETTY WATERS

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HENDERSON -- An interlocal agreement for further development of Loop 571 around the city of Henderson was signed Friday during a ceremony near the intersection of U.S. Highway 79 and the loop, a milestone in work toward securing the 3.4-mile extension.

Jeff Austin III, president, signed the agreement on behalf of North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority and county Judge Sandra Hodges signed on behalf of Rusk County.

"This is a joyous day to celebrate things a long time coming," John Cloutier, Rusk County's representative on the NET RMA board, said in remarks opening the ceremony.

The agreement is due to the efforts of many, many people, Cloutier said. He thanked the county judge and commissioners court, city officials, the Texas Department of Transportation, District 11 state Rep. Chuck Hopson and others. He singled out Landon Alford and Bob Davis, who had the idea for the loop at its inception and pushed through the first segment years ago.

Austin said Cloutier has also "been tremendous in working and explaining what we need to do and creating a sense of urgency."

Rusk County is far ahead of other counties in setting the loop as its No. 1 priority, Austin said. "Rusk County has become the model of how we can take projects from the bottom up and create regional significance," Austin said.

Because of the consensus from the city, the county, the chamber, TxDOT, NET RMA and everybody else, Austin said, "We speak with one voice and a lot of things are happening."

Judge Hodges gave special thanks to county commissioners for having been willing to put up local funds for the project that she said not all commissioners courts would do. "I'm just proud to be a part of it and I hope they can start really soon," she added, noting the extension will help alleviate traffic congestion around a new Henderson school campus opening in August.

The interlocal agreement gives Rusk County access to NET RMA's engineering and financial teams and also provides for TxDOT to provide engineering and design work for the road surface, bridges and right-of-way plans.

The agreement positions the project for the next round of funding, whatever the sources may be, to move the project forward with start of construction, according to Austin.

"Rusk County and the City of Henderson have worked very hard to bring the Loop project back to the front burner, and now they are beginning to see how their hard work will pay off," Austin said.

The planned extension will initially have two lanes with shoulders, with future plans to expand to a four-lane divided highway. TxDOT intends to complete engineering plans by September 2010, according to district engineer Randy Hopmann.

Cloutier said, "The quicker we can reach shovel-ready status, the better. Between the NET RMA, Rusk County and TxDOT, we can move this project forward and get to a point where we can qualify for grants and other funding mechanisms that will help us construct this road."