

Coalition Opposes Texas DOT on 17-mile Toll Road Loop Around Austin: Wants Protections for Environment, Austin's Historic Sights and Lady Bird Johnson's Legacy

A broad coalition has formed challenging a proposed tolled highway loop around south and west Austin, seeking protections from potential air, noise, water pollution, and structures which might mar several Austin treasures – Barton Springs, Zilker Park, Austin High School, Lady Bird Lake, and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Opponents, including two former mayors, Save Our Springs Alliance and country music legend Jerry Jeff Walker, have filed [a lawsuit](#) and launched an [online petition](#) to Texas Governor Greg Abbott, to give voice to broad public support for a substitute proposal recommended by the State's advisory panel.

Austin, Texas ([PRWEB](#)) June 01, 2016 -- Jerry Jeff Walker, the Texas country music legend, is one of 12 plaintiffs [in a lawsuit](#) filed in late February against Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), and TxDOT's partner, a regional toll road agency called the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (Case 1:16-cv-00234, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas, Austin Division). The suit seeks a comprehensive environmental study before building any part of a 17-mile tolled loop project, that the suit charges could cause environmental and economic damage to the City of Austin. It also seeks to protect the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center founded by the First Lady, and renowned actress Helen Hayes, in 1982 to protect native plants and natural landscapes, and many of Austin's iconic natural and cultural treasures.

Walker and former Mayor Frank Cooksey are joined in the lawsuit by another former Austin mayor, Carole Keeton, who also served as an Austin School Board President and Texas State Comptroller; conservation biologist, Dr. Laurie Dries; the 100-year old consumer and environmental leader Shudde Fath; and several neighborhood and conservation groups.

One of the lawsuit plaintiffs, The Friends of the Wildflower Center, a group of volunteers who are independent of the Wildflower Center, is launching [an online petition](#) to Texas Governor Greg Abbott urging him to step back from the tolled loop plan and instead convert an existing, under-utilized tolled loop on the east side of Austin, State Highway 130, into a free road. They believe this would provide an immediate solution to the congestion that often chokes I-35 as it passes through central Austin.

“Much of late first lady, Lady Bird Johnson's conservation legacy is under potential threat of over-pavement, pollution, and ugly-fication at the hands of TxDOT and the Federal Highway Administration,” said Jerry Jeff Walker.

The late first lady, Lady Bird Johnson, championed passage of The Highway Beautification Act. This was her legacy to limit highway billboards and protect scenic landscapes along our highways. The landmark law came to be known as “Lady Bird's Bill.” President Gerald Ford recognized her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for this work.

If built, this highway project would direct Interstate 35 traffic past the Wildflower Center and on to Austin's west side commuter highway, known as MoPac for the Missouri Pacific rail line it traces. It would add six lanes of traffic adjacent to the Center: the suit alleges that this would add noise, air, water, and visual pollution to the Center's tranquil, 279-acre gardens and trail system. A heavily-lit, elevated interchange just south of the Center

would be visible from the Center and its gardens.

“We feel that the Selected [State Highway 45 Southwest] Alternative as currently designed to funnel 30,000 plus vehicles a day past the Wildflower Center will have significant adverse impact on the Wildflower Center and jeopardizes its viability,” [wrote Wildflower Center Interim Executive Director Mike Abkowitz](#) from Lady Bird Wildflower Center, in an August 21, 2015 letter to TxDOT.

One of President and Lady Bird Johnson’s daughters, Luci Baines Johnson, also took notice, [writing a letter](#) to Austin’s Mayor Steve Adler and the City Council urging the City to protect Lady Bird Lake from the proposed expansion.

Ms. Keeton, who was elected State Comptroller as a Republican and later ran major breakaway campaign for Governor as an independent, said: “I cannot stand by and watch this happen to Austin High, Lady Bird Lake, Zilker Park, Barton Springs, the Wildflower Center and our city with a second Interstate 35 through Austin.”

Attorney and Executive Director of Save Our Springs Alliance, Bill Bunch noted, "In early 2015, when TxDOT and the CTRMA first [unveiled plans](#) for the more northern piece of the proposed tolled loop, the locals woke up and took notice. It showed schematics of a 1.4 mile long toll bridge elevated above the existing Mopac bridge over Lady Bird Lake and Austin’s famed Zilker Park. The added lanes and elevated “direct connector” bridge to downtown would sit directly on top of Austin’s celebrated Lady Bird Lake hike-and-bike trail, and would wrap around Austin High School.

TxDOT’s own I-35 Corridor Advisory Committee recommended the same solution as the Friends of the Wildflower Center in its August 2011 recommended plan (See Executive Summary, p. ii). With Texas voters approving more highway funds for Texas the last two years, Texas House Transportation Committee Chair Joe Pickett [recently picked up the proposal](#) to remove the tolls on the SH 130 eastern bypass and make it a free, substitute I-35. “Making SH 130 free would provide immediate relief for I-35 congestion,” added Walker. “It would help steer regional development east of I-35, where we want it to go, and away from the Hill Country. It makes perfect sense.”

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About Keep Mopac Local Coalition:

The Keep Mopac Local Coalition is made up of local environmental and water rights groups, Save Our Springs Alliance, Save Barton Creek Association and the Austin Group of the Sierra Club, Their mission is to stop the first piece of the 17-mile tolled loop, a proposed 3.6 mile State Highway 45 Southwest toll road, from crossing over the porous, cave-forming limestone that feeds water into [Austin’s iconic Barton](#) Springs.

About Save Our Springs Alliance:

The Save Our Springs Alliance works to protect the Edwards Aquifer, its springs and contributing streams, Texas water rights and the natural and cultural heritage of the Hill Country region and its watersheds, with special emphasis on Barton Springs.

About Friends of the Wildflower Center:

The Friends of the Wildflower Center is an association of volunteers, former board members, and supporters of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.



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