

This year is Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 80th anniversary, so over the next months, we will supplement some of our magazine stories with historical photos to offer a glimpse of life in the region in decades past. U.S. 290 and Texas 71 and the vehicles on them looked nothing like today's bigger crowded highways. At right, construction begins on what is to become U.S. 290 in Chappell Hill, near Brenham, in March 1922. At far right, in 1942, a Dodge half-ton pickup stops on the side of what is now Texas 71 in Bastrop County. *Historic photos courtesy of Texas Department of Transportation*



By Ben Wear

**D**ock Jackson grew up on the road to Houston. But back then, in the 1950s and 1960s, the “highway” from Austin to the coastal plains that passed through Bastrop was just a small-town street named Chestnut. From the front yard of his childhood home, Jackson could watch travelers making their heedless way through the town of about 3,000. After some time spent in Austin, Dallas and New York as a young man, he returned home and served 24 years on the Bastrop City Council.

“I remember it as the busiest highway,” he said recently. “Not busy like 71 now, of course, but pretty busy. Everything came through town. In those days, people got a chance to see Bastrop.”

That old town route gave way to a true highway loop south of old Bastrop: four lanes and a new bridge over the Colorado River that was cut through bottomland in the early 1970s. That highway drew development, then traffic lights and, in the past decade, overpasses that the Texas Department of Transportation, or TxDOT, built to bypass city traffic. Now more than 50,000 cars and trucks blast through Bastrop on Texas 71 each day.

Jackson is one of many residents in the Bluebonnet region who have seen highways grow crowded and clogged.

Bastrop and Bastrop County, like much of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's western service area, have exploded with growth and traffic in the past 20 years as Austin expands east toward what used to be more rural communities. And TxDOT, reacting to the growth in eastern Travis County, Elgin, Bastrop and San Marcos, has begun driving money and highway expansions into Blue-

### The toll of traffic: injuries, fatalities

**TEXAS 71** Between Texas 130 in eastern Travis County and Smithville, 2013-2018

SERIOUS INJURIES: **935, or 187 per year**

FATALITIES: **33, or 6.6 per year**

The top speed limit of Texas 71 between Bastrop and Smithville is 75 mph

**U.S. 290** Between Texas 130 near Manor and Giddings, 2013-2018

SERIOUS INJURIES: **926, or 185.2 per year**

FATALITIES: **52, or 10.4 year**

The top speed limit between Giddings and Elgin is 70 mph

*Statistics courtesy of TxDOT*

bonnet's service area.

The state agency, responsible for expansion and maintenance of interstates, U.S. highways, state highways and farm-to-market roads, plans to spend more than \$400 million on highway expansions in Lee, Bastrop and Caldwell counties between 2019 and 2024. Bluebonnet's eastern areas, including Burleson and Washington counties, are still mostly rural in character and TxDOT's plans there are more modest. Across the cooperative's service area, the myriad roads that do not fall under TxDOT jurisdiction are built, maintained and improved by counties and cities.

“The traffic dollars follow demand,” said Bastrop County Judge Paul Pape, who took office in 2012 and was re-elected in November for another four-year term leading the county Commissioners Court. “They go where the population is, and where the traffic is, always lagging behind development. We've lagged in the past, but I'm very happy now.”

Bluebonnet provides power across a 3,800-square-mile swath of Central Texas within 14 counties. The cooperative serves

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# the STUCK-IN-TRAFFIC BLUES

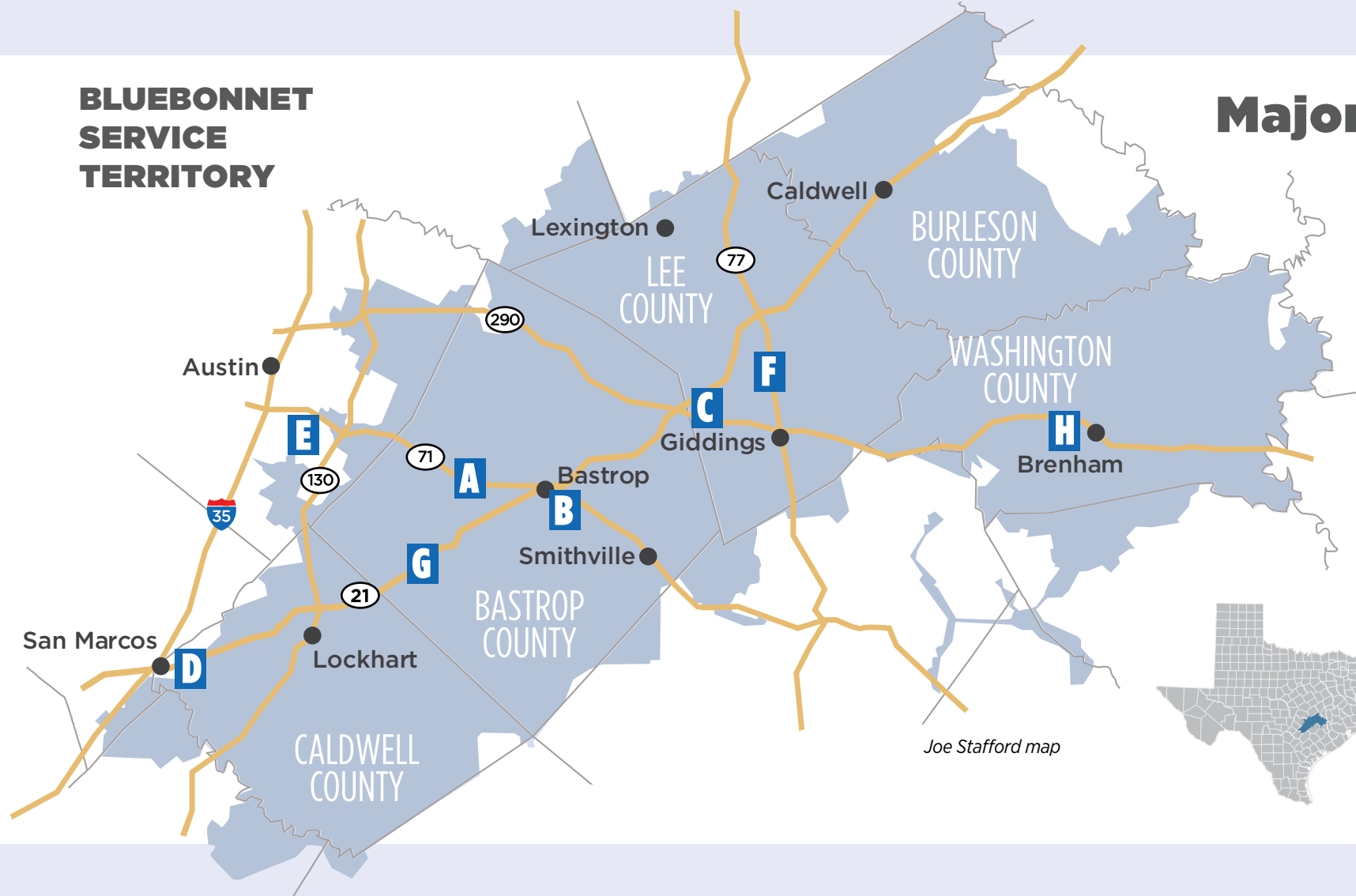
If you travel the **major highways** in Bluebonnet's area at **rush hour**, it's a familiar refrain. Relief may be around the corner: Some big **road improvements** are in the works.

Above, evening rush-hour traffic along U.S. 290 crawls into Manor from Austin.

At right, Dock Jackson, a former Bastrop City Council member, seen in front of Texas 71 in Bastrop, remembers when traffic traveled through town via Chestnut Street. Texas 71 was rerouted south of old Bastrop in the early 1970s. *Photos by Sarah Beal*



## BLUEBONNET SERVICE TERRITORY



Joe Stafford map

## Major road projects in the next 5 years

The Bluebonnet region continues to see major highway construction projects that accompany the area's explosive growth. Here are the biggest projects underway, listed roughly in order of overall impact to the region.

- A TEXAS 71 OVERPASSES** — \$142.1 million to bypass five traffic lights from FM 1209 to Kellam Road. Construction to begin between 2020 and 2023 on various overpasses.
- B TEXAS 71 FRONTAGE ROADS** at Colorado River in Bastrop — \$46.3 million to build frontage road bridges on either side of the existing main highway bridge. Work to start in spring 2019.
- C U.S. 290 MEDIAN AND SHOULDERS** — \$84.9 million to convert undivided four-lane highway to a divided highway, with wider shoulders, between Paige and Giddings.
- D SAN MARCOS LOOP** — \$78 million to complete the FM 110 loop around San Marcos' southern and eastern sides. Construction to begin in 2019 on all three segments.
- E TEXAS 130 EXPANSION** — \$220 million to expand the tollway from four lanes to six lanes between Texas 71 and Texas 45 North, and to add three flyover bridges at U.S. 290.
- F WIDEN U.S. 77 SHOULDERS** in Lee County — Add wider shoulders to the road north of Giddings. Work to begin in 2020.
- G TEXAS 21 EXPANSION** in Bastrop and Caldwell counties — Add passing lanes in various sections of the road between Bastrop and San Marcos. Work could start by late 2019.
- H IMPROVE U.S. 290 CLOVERLEAF** in Brenham — TxDOT is working on designs for this \$50 million project on the city's west side and hopes to begin work in 2024.

— Ben Wear

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more than 98,000 meters with 11,000-plus miles of power lines.

Bastrop County, which had about 17,500 residents in 1970 when Jackson was nearing high school graduation, had almost 85,000 people in 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The city of Bastrop itself has more than doubled in population in that time to 9,700 residents, while Elgin has grown 70 percent to about 8,800.

The growth in Hays County and San Marcos has been even more remarkable. Eastern parts of Hays County in or near San Marcos east of Interstate 35 are part of Bluebonnet's service area. San Marcos has ballooned by about 150 percent since 1970, to just over 63,000 people in 2017, and what was a primarily rural Hays County has sprouted rooftops in Buda and Kyle and seen its population grow by 650 percent in that time.

The rapid growth is also popping up in Bluebonnet's service area in Caldwell County. In the last 18 years, the population there has grown by more than 32 percent, and in the last few years, Caldwell has become one of the fastest growing counties in the Austin area.

In the Bluebonnet service area, TxDOT

has a number of major projects on deck, which it believes will handle the continuing growth as well as address other traffic hurdles in the cooperative's eastern counties, including Lee and Washington.

Other projects will impact Bluebonnet members commuting to and from Austin. Other less extensive road projects are planned for areas scattered across the service area.

### Making Texas 71 a freeway

For the past decade, TxDOT has been building overpasses along the highway in and just west of Bastrop, and only adding traffic lights to newly built frontage roads at intersections such as Loop 150, Texas 304 and Texas 95. But there are still five spots between Bastrop and Austin where cars going 70 mph might round a bend or crest a hill and face a red light: FM 1209, Pope Bend Road, Tucker Hill Lane, Kellam Road and Ross Road.

TxDOT has set aside \$142.1 million to eliminate those remaining bottlenecks with bridges over the crossing roads. The agency expects the work on the FM 1209 overpass to start in 2023, while work on the other intersections is expected to begin in the fall of

2020 and be completed by 2022.

In theory, for the first time, there would be a true expressway between Austin and Houston — a combo of Texas 71 and Interstate 10 beginning at Columbus — and Bluebonnet members would have clear sailing to and from Austin. But the possibility remains that TxDOT, reacting to additional development, could decide to install more stoplights in the interim.

"I tried to get a promise out of them that they wouldn't add any," Pape said. "They couldn't promise. But I honestly believe they will not."

### New Colorado River crossings

The Texas 71 bridge over the Colorado River and a freight railroad track just east of the river are nearing 50 years old, and frontage roads dead-end on either side of the river. That is going to change. In March, TxDOT plans to start construction of new frontage road bridges on either side of the existing Texas 71 bridge.

That \$46.3 million project should take three to four years to complete, TxDOT officials estimate. Then, in a separate project,

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At left, looking west toward Austin along U.S. 290 in Manor, traffic lights contribute to the congestion in the area. TxDOT doesn't plan to eliminate them in the foreseeable future. However, the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority said it is open to new talks about an extension of the tollway from U.S. 183 in Austin to several miles east of Manor. Photo by Ray Bitzkie



TxDOT plans to add medians and ample road shoulders throughout the 11-mile stretch of U.S. 290 between Paige and Giddings. Construction is expected to begin by the end of this year. Photo by Sarah Beal

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highway traffic would be temporarily diverted to those new frontage road bridges so that the 1972 bridge can be demolished and replaced with a new Texas 71 bridge that will be several feet higher above the river, Pape said.

“It will get a little bit worse for a couple of years, before it gets a whole lot better,” he said.

### Dividing U.S. 290

Most of U.S. 290 in the stretch from the eastern edge of Austin through Lee and Washington counties, is already a divided highway — two lanes on each side with a grassy median in the middle. This is infinitely safer than having four lanes separated by only a double yellow stripe, particularly at that highway’s speed limits of up to 75 mph.

But today, for much of the 11 miles of U.S. 290 between Paige and Giddings, the highway is a dangerous four-lane, undivided road with generally narrow shoulders. In December 2018, TxDOT began taking construction bids for three projects, totaling \$84.9 million. Those projects will include medians and ample road shoulders throughout that stretch. The last of the bids will come this spring, and construction should begin along that part of the highway by the end of 2019.

As for U.S. 290’s numerous traffic lights in Manor, Elgin, Giddings, Brenham and other spots in the Bluebonnet area, TxDOT officials said there are no plans in the foreseeable future to eliminate them.

About a decade ago, the Central Texas Re-

### What’s the speed limit?

Ever wonder how speed limits are determined for area highways and roads? They are set by the Texas Transportation Commission, an appointed board that governs the Texas Department of Transportation. The process is complex.

Among the factors that go into determining a speed limit are engineering recommendations based on field surveys of actual speeds motorists drive. The theory behind that is that drivers will, in general, drive at a speed that is appropriate to the design and condition of a given stretch of road.

gional Mobility Authority, the toll agency headquartered in Austin, had planned to build a turnpike extending from U.S. 183 in Austin to several miles east of Manor. But Manor residents and business owners at the time rebelled at the idea of an expressway through the middle of their town. The tollway opened in 2015, but stops just west of Manor.

Mobility authority officials say now they are open to talking about an extension of the tollway, which would eliminate grinding rush hour traffic through Manor. TxDOT reports that 47,570 vehicles traveled on U.S. 290 dai-

ly in 2017. But those talks are in early stages, and it is unclear when or even if that project will happen.

### Looping San Marcos

Earlier this decade, TxDOT completed the first stretch of FM 110, a new loop around San Marcos’ lightly developed southern and eastern sides. Virtually all of that loop — the completed part and the three segments yet to be built (running 11.2 miles from Texas 123 to Interstate 35 at Yarrington Road) — are in the Bluebonnet service area.

TxDOT plans to take bids on all three of those new segments in 2019, officials said, with construction to follow. The remaining construction cost is an estimated \$78 million. TxDOT plans to initially build the loop as a two-lane road and eventually expand it into a divided four-lane highway.

“The loop is going to be quite a game changer,” said John Thomaides, mayor of San Marcos from 2016 until 2018. “Economically, it’s a huge boon for the city. We’ve already seen companies that are looking to locate in San Marcos and looking to locate on that loop.

“The future is very bright here, if we kind of let it happen.”

### Tollway expansions

Bluebonnet members who commute to Austin and back will also be aided by a huge project already underway, as well as several others to begin soon east of Austin.

The mobility authority is two years into construction to expand about eight miles of U.S. 183 from U.S. 290 to Texas 71 near Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. This \$750 million expansion from a four-lane road with traffic lights to a six-lane tollway that will also have four to six free frontage road lanes should be finished in late 2020.

The mobility authority and TxDOT, meanwhile, are about to begin \$220 million of expansion work on the Texas 130 tollway, a busy stretch of which is in the western part of Bluebonnet’s service area. Early this year, the authority will begin a \$127 million project to add three flyover bridges to the U.S. 290/Texas 130 interchange to ease the transition between those two highways. Only one such direct connecting bridge is there now. And TxDOT is about to begin two projects to add a third lane to each side of Texas 130 between Texas 45 North in Pflugerville and Texas 71 east of the airport.

### More road projects in the works

TxDOT has a number of other projects on smaller, less trafficked roads set to begin in 2019 and 2020, including widening several miles of U.S. 77 in Lee County and three stretches of Texas 21 in Caldwell and Bastrop counties. That crucial road between Bastrop and San Marcos, much of which now is just two lanes, would become what TxDOT calls a “Super 2,” with passing lanes added on alternating sides to make it essentially a three-lane

**The U.S. 290 cloverleaf on Brenham’s west side tends to create bottlenecks, particularly when special events such as football games put more people on the road. TxDOT plans to rework the cloverleaf; construction could begin in 2024, officials said. Photo by Sarah Beal**



### Try some TxDOT tools

The state’s Department of Transportation website, [txdot.gov](http://txdot.gov), has useful information for drivers, particularly about highway conditions and improvement projects.

DriveTexas.org shows current conditions, closures, construction and other information across the state. By providing your location, the map will tell you about road conditions in your area.

On the [txdot.gov](http://txdot.gov) homepage, a link takes you to the Project Tracker program, where you can follow progress of road construction projects.

For an overview of TxDOT’s ongoing efforts to improve the state’s roads, go to [texasclearlanes.com](http://texasclearlanes.com).

road for much of its length. That change will reduce the number of drivers trying to pass in the oncoming lane, a primary cause of head-on collisions.

Pape said he has been told TxDOT has Super 2 expansions in mind for a 16-mile stretch of Texas 95 between Elgin and Bastrop. That part of the highway has had an increasing number of accidents in recent years — and 23 fatalities since 2010. In 2018, at least 40 crashes and five deaths were reported on that part of the highway. TxDOT has no near-term improvements planned, but it began to reassess the speed limit on that stretch of Texas 95 after four members of a family died in a crash last October.

“Help is on the way, but it’s taken longer

than it should have taken,” said Jackson, who has remained politically involved since leaving the Bastrop council in 2009. Texas 95 “is not well lit and so narrow. We have all these little crosses, markers on the road where people have been killed.”

### Plans for co-op’s eastern counties

Former Washington County Judge John Brieden, who stepped down in January after eight years in office, has highway goals that are important to residents there.

In particular, Brieden would like to see a reworking of the troublesome U.S. 290 cloverleaf on Brenham’s west side. That interchange between U.S. 290 to the west and a loop around Brenham is a bottleneck on the route from Houston to Austin, particularly when special events such as football games attract more drivers.

“There are only one-lane entrances and exits that back up,” Brieden said. “Sometimes we have traffic stacked up as much as two miles.”

The interchange situation, Brieden said, has been a real “hot potato” in the Brenham community.

The state is working on it, said officials with TxDOT’s Bryan district. The district is “developing concept alternatives” about how to improve the U.S. 290 cloverleaf, spokesman Bob Colwell said.

TxDOT has allotted \$50 million for the eventual reworking of the cloverleaf, Colwell said in an email, and officials envision starting the construction in 2024.

In January, the agency planned to award a contract of about \$3.5 million, Colwell said, to widen narrow FM 50 by adding shoulders and turn lanes from about two miles north of FM 2621 to where the road feeds into Texas 105 on Brenham’s east side. □