

THE

Real Spelce

AUSTIN LETTER

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Dear Client:

Now that it's official President-Elect George W. Bush is going to move out of downtown Austin to set up residency in another government building in Washington, it's time to take note of some key items that will impact you and Austin and Texas.

First, the obvious. It doesn't matter what titles they end up with, if you have a close personal or business relationship with Texans **Karl Rove, Karen Hughes, Don Evans, Joe Allbaugh** and **Clay Johnson** you are going to be as close to the seat of national power as any of the highest-ranking, longtime Washington insiders.

There will be other Texans moving to Washington immediately and over the next year-or-so, that will also wield considerable influence during a Bush administration. But, make no mistake, all others fall into the second tier of presidential access – unless Texans such as former Congressman **Bill Archer**, Congressman **Charles Stenholm** or Texas Agriculture Commissioner **Susan Combs** are named to the president's Cabinet.

Another point. If you're an alum of **Baylor** or **SMU**, or heavily involved with either institution, get ready to join the battle for one of those institutions to be selected as the site for a **George W. Bush Presidential Library**. Each institution starts out with a bit of an inside track: **Laura Bush** is an alum of SMU, and Baylor is close to Crawford, the western White House.

Speaking of proximity to the president's ranch home in Crawford, the major Austin hotels should waste no time in putting in a bid to be the HQ for the White House Press Corps. Oh sure, Waco is much closer to Bush's ranch but, take this to the bank, the **White House Press Corps will never, never, never settle for Waco** as the place to spend many nights when Bush regularly comes back to Texas.

If he's so inclined, President-Elect Bush could end up with some nice, secure quarters right here in Austin – just for the asking. Very few people know a downtown suite, complete with fireplace and all the amenities, was built as a place where **President Lyndon Johnson** could spend some time, with all the necessary security elements installed by the Secret Service. It hasn't been used since LBJ died (LBJ even used it quite often after he left the presidency). It's located in the already-secure Jake Pickle Federal Building in the heart of downtown Austin. It's already owned by the Feds, so the rent would be right.

One of Austin's newest major roadways — Loop1/Mo-Pac Blvd — already “carries much more traffic than it was planned and designed to handle,” according to the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). That's not news if you travel the route, but what's being done about it?

The quick answer is it's under study. But the problem is quite complicated. For one thing, “under current levels of use, many of Loop 1/MoPac's **roadways and bridges have outlived their useful life,**” TxDOT reports. As a result, even if no added capacity improvements are made, the freeway will still have to be rehabilitated.

The study has a two-fold objective. First, TxDOT needs to improve the safety and design deficiencies. Secondly, it must figure out how to handle Austin's growing north/south traffic needs well into the future. **It's a serious situation.** Traffic growth is already projected regardless of actions taken. And, if improvements are not made, more spillover traffic may occur as motorists find new routes through neighborhoods. Not to mention the danger.

Let's look at two examples under consideration. **Exit ramp changes are being considered at Windsor Road.** One proposal calls for a standard diamond interchange to replace the loop ramps there. A diamond interchange has matching pairs of ramps from both sides, similar to most freeway interchanges found throughout Austin.

Also, the **Westover Road interchange is being considered for closure and the ramps removed.** TxDOT says the current interchanges are too closely spaced and Westover is a designated residential street, not a City of Austin designated major thoroughfare. However, other options are also being explored to keep the Westover ramps open.

The state agency needs to narrow down more than 100 transportation improvement concepts for Loop1/MoPac to a **limited number of concepts** that “satisfy the project's mobility, operations, safety goals and purpose and need.” The study team is currently evaluating each concept for operational performance, environmental impacts, costs and right-of-way needs.

TxDOT stresses no final decisions have been made, even though the agency has spent more than a year already seeking input. **Employers and individuals are still encouraged to react.** You can call 512-684-3234 to request a survey by mail, or you can provide your comments at <http://www.mopac183.com>.

So, what's the timeframe? To start with, completion – whatever form it takes – is years away. Phase I is in process. Phase II will begin in early 2001. Citizens will be invited to preview the improvement alternatives and **offer additional ideas and concerns in March, 2001.** The environmental evaluation process will extend through 2003. Then, if environmental clearance is obtained, work would begin on plans, right-of-way acquisitions and utility adjustments.

With a little luck, motorists navigating the southern reaches of Austin will get a nice Christmas present. The Woodward Street bridge near the intersection of IH35 and Ben White Boulevard could be open before Christmas.

Crews have been working steadily since demolishing the old bridge the first week of August. The overpass was too narrow to handle the added lanes required on IH35 for the new direct connect “flyovers” at Ben White Boulevard. **The original plan called for opening the Woodward Street overpass during the first half of November.** But, rainy weather in both October and November has work crews scurrying to meet the new Christmas deadline.

Work also is moving steadily along on another bridge on that portion of IH35. It’s not that obvious because it’s almost hidden from view. Workers have erected bridge columns at **Williamson Creek, between the north- and southbound main lanes of IH35.** Beams have already been placed on the columns and work on the bridge decking has already begun. Traffic will shift to the new bridge next year, so the old spans can be replaced. Northbound traffic will shift to the new bridge first. However, there is no firm date for this to take place.

If you want to shop till you drop this holiday season, you’re in the second best place in Texas to do that. Travis County has the second most retail space per capita in Texas – 32 sq.ft. of retail space per person. Dallas and Collin counties make the Dallas metro area number one in this category, by tallying 34 sq.ft. per capita. By the way, it’s so competitive in Dallas, some malls are going beyond traditional Santa photos and gift wrapping to lure shoppers. They’re using live penguins, acrobatic Santas and **“hideouts” for non-shoppers** (read: husbands!).

Residents along Lake Austin wish this week’s ice storm held off until after 12/29/00. Now, they’re hoping for a blast or two of icy weather in January. That’s because Lake Austin will be lowered by 12 feet 12/29/00 to allow for boat dock repairs and to expose the mass of duckweed that is inundating the lake, interfering with recreational activities. If the freezes occur in January (the lake will be low for six weeks), it should retard the duckweed growth for the next couple of years.

Speaking of lakes, Lakes Travis and Buchanan are full – a far cry from the drought conditions of just a few months ago. What are the immediate prospects? The Lower Colorado River Authority is projecting an ever-so-slight rise between now and the end of January – no problems. And, when the LCRA reports the lakes are “full”, it doesn’t mean we’re in danger of flooding. For instance, Lake Travis stands around 681 feet above mean sea level. It can go to 691 before the LCRA will open floodgates to release water downstream to prevent flooding. The spillway height at Travis’s Mansfield Dam is well above 700 feet. So, the current situation is just about perfect.

Will the purchase of a half-dozen small area newspapers by the *Austin American-Statesman* severely limit the news coverage to which you've become accustomed? As a practical matter, not really. Frankly it's more about advertising than news coverage. This will enable the *Statesman's* owners, Cox Newspapers, Inc., to package the *Statesman* with any of the local papers to increase ad revenue.

Cox bought the bi-weekly *Bastrop Advertiser* and the weekly *Westlake Picayune*, *Smithville Times*, *Pflugerville Pflag*, *Lake Travis View* and *North Lake Travis Log* of Lago Vista. The purchase price was not disclosed. The small newspapers were previously owned by a Houston group, Westward Communications. They have a combined circulation of 20,500 and employ about 49 people.

As is normal in such a purchase, the new owner says there will be **no layoffs** and the newspapers will continue to cover activities in their local communities, such as school and community organization news. That's fine. The *Statesman*, serving a much bigger market, really doesn't devote space to such stories anyway.

But, make no bones about it, the small newspapers serve a very real purpose in this world of mass media by focusing on issues right down where the rubber meets the road. Keep an eye on how Cox continues that commitment. The profit margin at the *Statesman* is very high. **It'll be interesting to see whether Cox keeps the more marginal smaller operations alive and kicking** if it doesn't see some significant benefit in increased ad revenues as a result of packaging the products for advertisers.

As is our custom since we began publishing this newsletter more than 20 years ago, we take off the last two weeks of each year. So the next edition you will receive will be dated 1/5/01. We want to take this opportunity to thank you for your subscription and wish for you and your family the very best during this holiday season. And, we sincerely hope the New Year will bring you the prosperity your hard work deserves. (Don't forget what **Dr. Louis Overholster** says: "Money does not grow on trees – unless you're selling them at Christmas time!")

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Sincerely



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