

# Second causeway routes narrowed to 5

By CARL PHILLIPS  
*Island Breeze*

And then there were five.

After starting out with 21 potential routes for a second causeway connecting the mainland to South Padre Island, the Cameron County Regional Mobility Authority presented the final five selections at a public meeting at Port Isabel High School last week.

On the mainland side, three of the remaining alternates tie into Centerline Road alongside the Cameron County Airport. The other two terminate a little further south at Holly Beach.

On the Island, three locations were selected for that end of the bridge. The northernmost is in the vicinity of Beach Access No. 6. Two are shown ending in the area of Beach Access No. 5 and Atwood County Park. The other two terminate in the vicinity of The Shores development just north of Andy Bowie Park.

Stacey Benningfield, associate vice president and environmental services leader for the consulting firm HNTB Corp., presented the routes, and reviewed the factors that led to the elimination of most of the original routes.

These factors included safety issues, economic factors, traffic flow, emergency evacuation, estimated costs of construction, and environmental factors.

Of the original routes that had led into the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, all were automatically eliminated because of their termination in a national wildlife refuge, Benningfield said.

Other alternatives were dropped due to safety factors, particularly during emergency evacuations. Higher costs for land in more developed areas also factored into the decisions to eliminate some of the route possibilities.

Most of the comments during the meeting favored route No. 2, which starts at Centerline Road on the mainland and ends north of the town of South Padre Island near Atwood County Park.

"Your selection number two looks very good to me," former Port Isabel mayor Leo Sanders said. "You needed an evacuation route that would also eliminate traffic jams on special occasions that bring big crowds to the Island. Alternate Number Two seems to meet those requirements best."

Most Rio Grande Valley traffic is headed for the beaches north of town, he said. With No. 2, these people would not have to drive through Port Isabel and then South Padre Island's congested areas to get to the county park beaches.

Dennis Franke, developer of The Shores on the Island, also favored No. 2. He asked CCRMA officials to remember that The Shores is very unsale-



This map shows five possible routes for a second causeway access connecting South Padre Island to the mainland. The routes were presented at a public meeting last week at the Port Isabel High School. (Courtesy of HNTB Corporation)

thanked the authority for "listening to us and allowing us input" into the decision-making process.

Cameron County Commissioner David Garza liked the way authority members had considered environmental issues. He added that the county is in the process of upgrading the county airport and bringing it up to standard.

"But let's don't keep talking," he said. "Let's get moving and get the environmental studies begun."

Island businessman Doyle Wells agreed with Garza.

"This is the time to do the environmental studies while the economy is down. That way we'll be

thankful to all of us on the Island."

From the beginning of discussions about a second causeway, some Port Isabel officials have expressed concerns over the impact on visitor traffic in their community.

Port Isabel Mayor Joe Vega said the Holly Beach route connections to Highway 100, and he feared that would have an impact on commerce in Port Isabel by diverting traffic north of the city.

Vega also emphasized his view that the Texas Department of Transportation continue to focus on extending the life of the Queen Isabella Memorial Bridge.

bay) to the north end of the Island," he said, expressing concerns about the environmental impact.

He also pointed out that business is already suffering in Port Isabel, noting that Chili's Restaurant there had just closed.

Gangel said that a loss of visitor traffic in Port Isabel would further aggravate an already difficult business environment, predicting that other businesses would fold unless traffic to the Island continued to be routed through the town.

Area resident Andres Garcia suggested that the second causeway project would be better replaced by a light rail system starting at the north end of

Island, also favored No. 2. He asked CCRMA officials to remember that The Shores is very upscale, and to please keep that in mind as they continue their planning.

Overall, the comments were positive about all the remaining five options.

South Padre Island Alderwoman JoAnn Evans was happy with the choices remaining, and she

"This is the time to do the environmental studies while the economy is down. That way we'll be ready to build when the economy rebounds," he said.

South Padre Island City Manager Dewey Cashwell said the final choices were all good alternatives.

"Any one of them would improve the safety

extending the life of the Queen Isabella Memorial Bridge.

"We need that bridge for another 50 years," he said.

Scott Gangel, president of the local Surfriders Association chapter, questioned whether a second access is even needed.

"It's a long stretch from Holly Beach (across the

second causeway project would be better replaced by a light rail system starting at the north end of the Island headed south, and then turn east to cross the Laguna Madre parallel to the existing causeway on a route inland.

"You already have traffic problems on the Island," he said. "This way you keep a lot of cars from ever crossing over there in the first place."