

New SPI causeway expected to create 90,000 jobs in coming decades

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SOUTH PADRE ISLAND — Officials are trimming a list of five proposed routes for a project to build a second causeway that would transform eastern Cameron County, creating about 90,000 jobs, they said Friday.

“We’ve got to plan for the future of the community,” said David Alex, chairman of the Cameron County Regional Mobility Authority, the agency that oversees the project.

Officials say the project will open up the northern stretch of South Padre Island. They are reviewing environmental factors, cost estimates and public input to determine the new causeway’s route.

A decision is expected by December, Alex said. Construction of the \$600 million project could begin in as soon as two to three years.

Bridge tolls would repay bonds issued to pay for what would become one of the largest infrastructure projects ever undertaken in the Rio Grande Valley, Alex said.

“It ought to be a self-sustaining operation,” he said.

So far, officials have outlined five possible routes, with the southernmost located about four miles away from the Queen Isabella Memorial Bridge, said Mario Jorge, the Texas Department of Transportation’s district engineer for the eight-county region that includes Cameron County. His agency is also working on the project with consultants HNTB Corp.

The northernmost and southernmost routes are located about four miles apart, said HNTB’s Richard Ridings.

The northernmost route would connect to the Island near Beach Access No. 6, officials said. Other routes would connect to the Island near Beach Access No. 5 and Atwood County Park, near The Shores development, north of Andy Bowie Park.

From the mainland, three proposed routes would tie into Centerline Road near the Cameron County Airport, officials said. Two others would connect just south of Holly Beach.

The project’s routes range in length from 7.2 to 7.8 miles, said David Garcia, assistant director of the Cameron County Transportation Department.

Officials have yet to determine whether the causeway will be two or four lanes wide, Garcia said.

A private company could be contracted to build and operate the span, said Jorge, the TxDOT official.

“There are several companies that have talked to us that are worldwide,” said Alex, the

Cameron County mobility authority chairman.

The proposed causeway would spur the development of 3,000 privately owned acres on the Island, stretching about 25 miles north of town to the Mansfield Cut, he said. The project also would transform areas of the mainland where new roads leading to the causeway would be built.

“They’ll be all new communities developing on the mainland,” Alex said.

With all that development expected, he said, about 90,000 jobs would be created over a period of 40-50 years.

Fernando Del Valle is a reporter for the *Valley Morning Star* in Harlingen.