

County agrees to help cover F1 road improvements

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Travis County commissioners Tuesday agreed to pay for at least part of two key road expansions near the Circuit of the Americas, the track in southeastern Travis County scheduled to host its first Formula One Grand Prix in November. The decision represents a significant shift from some officials' earlier insistence that organizers pick up the full tab for the work.

The improvements, both approved by a 3-2 vote, involve the widening of Elroy Road, which borders the track, and a two-thirds of a mile extension of little-used Kellam Road to Pearce Lane, which would create another artery to the track.

"For the last two years, we've maintained that F1 should pay its own way," said Commissioner Sarah Eckhardt, who voted against the measures. "Today, by this motion, we do a 180 and now agree to pick up part of the tab for F1 on Elroy and all of the tab for F1 on Kellam."

She added, "We have extremely strong footing to demand that the developers pay for the improvements, but we are instead going to have the taxpayers pay."

County officials gave no cost estimates but have said that race-related road improvements, including those for Elroy and Kellam, would cost \$8 million.

Track officials were pleased by the vote.

"It sounds like this gets the ball rolling," said Circuit of the Americas spokeswoman Julie Loignon. "They are in for at least part of it."

Previously, the county agreed only to pay for the repaving of Elroy and the existing portion of Kellam. Both roads are in disrepair.

Kellam is currently a road to nowhere. One resident estimated there are fewer than 10 residences on it. Two properties are between Kellam and Pearce. An 82-acre tract off Kellam is under option to someone associated with the track, a representative for Rainbow Properties said recently. On Pearce, the state General Land Office owns a 657-acre tract.

Within the past few weeks, track officials presented the county with a plan in which Circuit of the Americas would do the work on extending Kellam if it was then reimbursed. At that time, Loignon said: "We have not determined who would actually

manage the project. That work would need to be bid out."

Commissioner Margaret Gómez, who supported the county picking up some of the cost of the road improvements, said the Kellam extension is needed for emergency vehicles.

"I'm not going to take a chance that some disaster will take place in Precinct 4 because a resident was unable to get to an emergency vehicle because the congestion prevented that," Gómez said. "If there has been a turnaround on my part, it's because I haven't been in denial."

The F1 event could draw up to 120,000 fans for the Sunday race and 300,000 over the three-day weekend.

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Additional reporting by Farzad Mashhood

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