PROGRESS HAS A DRAWBACK / Owners get bypass blues as fewer cars drive past

By MIKE SNYDER
Staff

If motorists on a new branch of Texas 249 glance out their windows as they zip past Tomball, they'll see a blur of restaurants and shops that soon will be framed in their rear-view mirrors.

The bypass road, which local leaders prefer to call the "Tomball Expressway," is helping commuters reach homes to the north and workplaces to the south more quickly. But some merchants along the road now known as "Business 249" say sales have dwindled as motorists pass them by.

"It's definitely affected us. Our revenues are down 15 percent," said Valery Norton, the assistant manager of a Starbucks on Business 249.

The effect of the new road on this northwest Harris County town of 10,000 illustrates the dilemma facing many Houston area communities adapting to the growth surrounding them.

As developers create new subdivisions and business centers on pastures and fields, towns such as Tomball increasingly become just a set of traffic lights motorists would prefer to avoid on their way to something else.

"These rural areas aren't rural any more," said Pat Waskowiak, a program manager in the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

"There's an inherent conflict between trying to accommodate the commuter traffic and the smaller communities that are trying to retain their business and their character."

Tomball City Manager Jan Belcher, however, said the town's decision to support construction of the bypass was intended to benefit local residents as well as commuters. The Texas Department of Transportation opened the southbound lanes in January and northbound lanes in May.

The town and its chamber of commerce lobbied for the road, Belcher said, because Texas 249 was becoming choked with traffic. This created problems for local residents trying to get to businesses on the highway as well as for motorists headed somewhere else, Belcher said.

"It's working exactly as it was intended," Belcher said. "It allows the (commuter) traffic to get through, and it allows people on Business 249 to get in and out of the businesses."

Tomball's sales tax receipts, a good indicator of the volume of business, are down about 1.3 percent this year from the same period last year, Belcher said. But this is more likely a result of the sluggish economy than of the new road's impact, she said.

Jo Nell Brown, 60, a lifelong resident of the area who owns a gift shop in a strip center on Business 249, agreed.

"The economic situation is very poor," she said.
Brown said her own business hasn't been affected by the bypass, since most of her customers are local residents.

But businesses such as fast-food restaurants and coffee shops, where people stop on impulse, have lost much of the captive market they had when Texas 249 was the only major north-south route through Tomball, Brown said.

Bruce Hillegeist, president of the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce, agreed that some merchants have been hurt by the new road. But business should bounce back, he said, as people adjust to new traffic patterns.

Motorists approaching Tomball from the south have a clear choice of taking the bypass, marked as Texas 249, or the old road, marked as Business 249.

From the north, however, motorists go straight onto the bypass and must veer quickly into the right lane, exit to a frontage road and turn left on a cross street if they want to get into town.

Karen Baker, a TxDOT engineer who oversaw the project, said it wasn't possible to design the southbound entrance to the bypass the same way as the northbound entrance.

"The geometry didn't work," she said.

TxDOT spokeswoman Raquelle Lewis said the economic impact of the bypass wasn't considered in the environmental assessment for the project.

The road has been planned since the 1990s, Lewis said, and the support of the town government and chamber of commerce were important in the decision.

Norton, the Starbucks manager, and others in Tomball said some of the lost business may return when the bypass becomes a toll road. Many people would rather put up with some traffic for a short distance than pay a toll, they said.

The Texas Transportation Commission voted last year to extend Texas 249 by 12 miles to the north, including the Tomball bypass, a toll road, but the timing is uncertain.