

Interim Update Report

Interstate 69 Corridor Segment Committee 4



The Texas Transportation Commission created the Interstate 69 (I-69) Corridor Advisory Committee and Corridor Segment Committees to assist the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) in the transportation planning process of the I-69 Corridor. Both sets of committees provide a locally focused, citizen driven basis of planning along the corridor.

I-69 Advisory Committee: The I-69 Corridor Advisory Committee (CAC) was created by Minute Order 111294 on March 27, 2008 for the purpose of facilitating and achieving consensus among affected communities and interested parties on desired transportation improvements along the I-69 Corridor. The Advisory Committee studied the future needs of the I-69 Corridor and published their findings and recommendations in *A Citizen's Report on the Current and Future Needs of the I-69 Corridor 2008*.

I-69 Segment Committee 4: I-69 Corridor Segment Committee 4 (CSC 4) is one of five Segment Committees created by Minute Order 111527 on September 25, 2008 for the purpose of providing input and recommendations on the designated routes of the I-69 Corridor in their areas. The CSCs are composed of members representing cities, counties, metropolitan planning organizations, ports, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and the Texas Farm Bureau along the I-69 Corridor. The Segment Committees continue to meet and study environmental planning features and plan the best route for their communities. The CSCs will report their findings, advice and recommendations to the Texas Transportation Commission and TxDOT's Executive Director.

The area included in CSC 4 is shown in **Figure 1** and includes the counties of Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Wells, Kenedy, Kleberg, Live Oak, Nueces, San Patricio, and Willacy. CSC 4 encompasses portions of the U.S. 59, U.S. 77, U.S. 281 and SH 44 routes. Members of the committee currently include those individuals listed in **Table 1**.

Interim Committee Update

In September 2010, TxDOT's Executive Director, Amadeo Saenz, spoke with the Chairs of the I-69 Segment Committees about how the process is going, asked that each committee compile an update on their progress and work, and asked that the CSCs identify projects that they currently see as priorities in their areas. This information would be used to update the Texas Transportation Commission on the progress of the CSCs thus far.

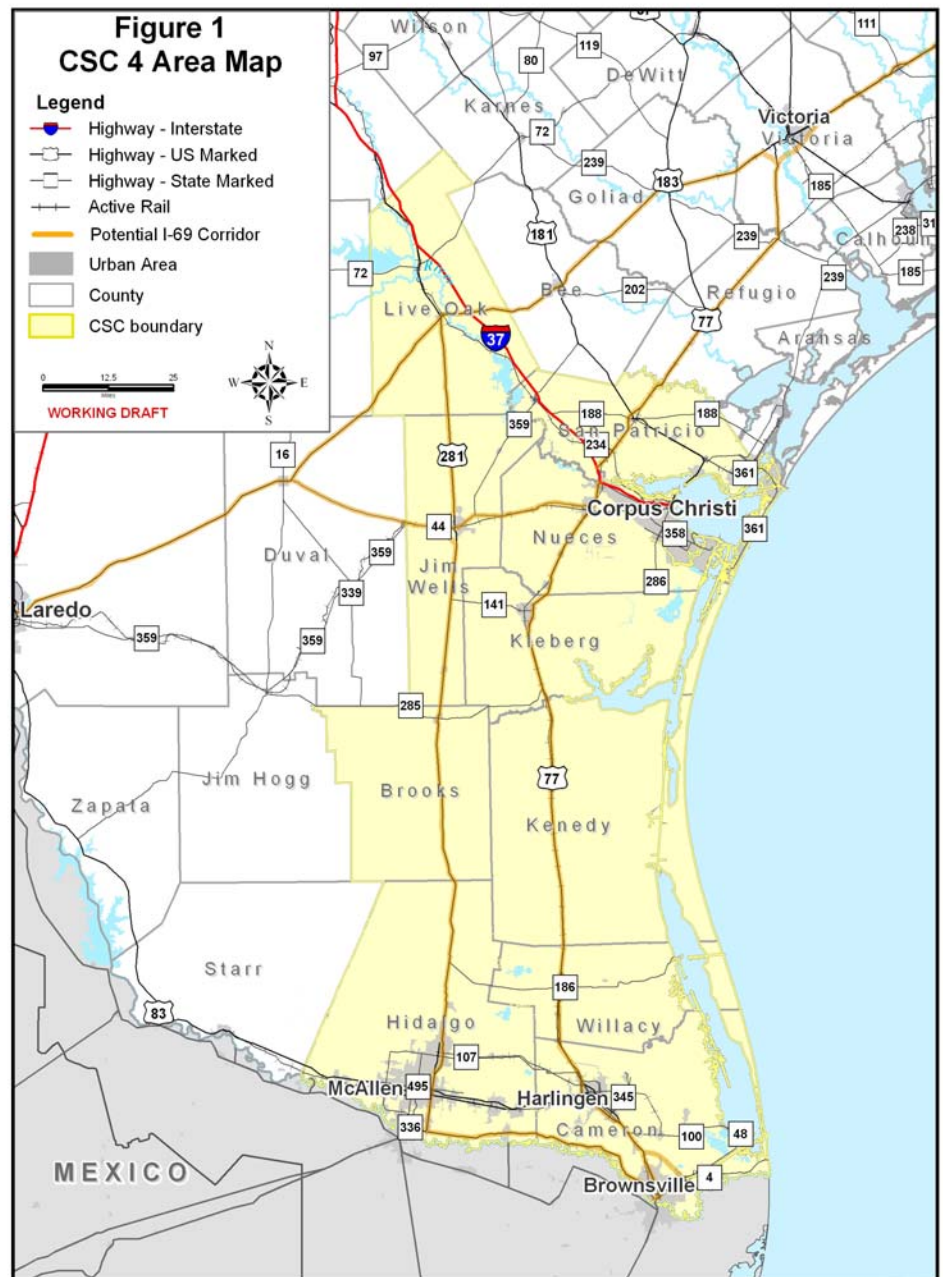


Table 1 – CSC 4 Committee Members (November 2010)

<u>Member</u>	<u>Appointing Entity</u>
Frank Brogan	Port of Corpus Christi
Roy Cantu	Kleberg Co.
Charlie Cardenas	City of Corpus Christi
Ralph Coker	Nueces Co.
Susan Durham	Jim Wells Co.
Teclo J. Garcia	City of McAllen
Angie Garza	Hidalgo County MPO
Eddy Hernandez	Brownsville MPO
Jim Huff	Live Oak Co.
Wesley Jacobs	City of Falfurrias
Alan Johnson	City of Harlingen
Stanley Laskowski	City of Kingsville
Pat Liston*	Harlingen-San Benito MPO
Sergio T. Lopez	Port of Brownsville
Troy Nedbalek	Texas Farm Bureau
Tom Niskala	Corpus Christi MPO
Joseph F. Phillips	Hidalgo Co.
Raul M. Ramirez	Brooks Co.
Daniel O. Rios	Lower Rio Grande Partnership
Terry Simpson	San Patricio Co.
Edna Tamayo	Cameron Co.
Louis E. Turcotte, III	Kenedy Co.
TBD	Willacy Co.

* Committee Chair

CSC 4 Update Information

Using the topics outlined below, members of CSC 4 reported the following information on the current progress of committee efforts.

How the Segment Committee process has worked

CSC 4 members report that the meetings are conducted in a manner that will ensure a comprehensive plan is produced. The meetings offer informative discussion regarding various aspects of the conceptual interstate. Segment Committee members have examined specific routes and identified upgrades to these routes. In examining routes throughout the corridor, benefits of making connections to border crossings, ports and airports were discussed by the committee. Members also report that individual committee members have been given the opportunity to express their concerns and advise TxDOT of unique local issues, adding that steady progress has been made through the hard work of the committee. CSC members are meeting with communities and other local organizations outside of the CSC meetings which is important when preparing for the next meeting.

What has been working well

CSC 4 members note that TxDOT works hard to make sure all methods of communication are available to committee members to achieve success. Discussions have gone well and TxDOT has been responsive to the items needed by the committee or those that require discussion. Members add

that the back and forth dialogue between members of the committee is also a beneficial part of the meetings. CSC 4 members see the committee’s work in identifying needs and corridor issues as working well and feel that incorporating committee member recommendations into conceptual interstate layout maps was a useful exercise.

What can be improved

CSC 4 members acknowledge that having more information on funding would be helpful to understand what can be accomplished on the corridor in the future. Members suggest that, in some cases, committee meetings can be improved by minimizing time spent repeating issues. It may help for the committee to limit repeated discussion of issues that have been examined by the committee in previous meetings. Setting limits for continued discussion may help expedite committee work. Members indicate the CSC’s ability to provide meaningful input could also be improved with more frequent meetings or with meetings that involve smaller groups of committee members who share common issues.

Tasks completed by the Segment Committee

CSC 4 members note that the committee has reviewed the highways within their segment and indicated important locations on the maps. This effort will help TxDOT potentially plan corridor improvements to allow for efficient access. Members appreciate that TxDOT has responded to their requests to consider modifications of preliminary plans recommended along the corridor.

A member reports that a major accomplishment of the committee is narrowing the preliminary route of I-69 to primarily use existing roadways. Members have reviewed these proposed routes to determine where there may be potential issues and to propose ideas to mitigate those issues with corridor options like overpasses, relief routes or modified interstate cross-sections. The committee is working to ensure that the segment transitions successively with the other segments.

Helpful Segment Committee activities and exercises

CSC 4 members report that listening to other members’ needs and hearing other viewpoints is a beneficial activity. Viewing maps with footprints over-laid on top of existing roads being considered for upgrade has been helpful during the conceptual interstate layout exercise because this allowed members to see and understand the impact of converting existing roads to interstates. Small group exercises and meetings were cited by members as being particularly helpful.

Potential future activities and exercises

Committee members noted that it would be useful to continue holding small group sessions and beginning public involvement activities in order to obtain input from other members of their communities. Receiving information about funding opportunities and understanding the cost for building

I-69 within their areas were also identified as important additional activities for the committee. Members would also like to receive information on the status of construction activities.

Major challenges and key issues related to developing Interstate 69 with Segment 4

CSC 4 members believe that, as much as possible, future highway construction should utilize existing rights-of-way. Such actions are the best way to minimize impacts on property owners and potentially minimize facility costs. Members consistently recognize that money to finance the project is a major challenge related to developing I-69.

Members pointed out that a major challenge to I-69's development is the manner in which it may be implemented through or around communities. Engaging members of affected communities now was recommended as a way to avoid conflicts that may slow future development. In particular, the need to explain and plan with residents of Premont, Odem, and Refugio was cited as a critical effort that should be undertaken as quickly as possible.

Committee members, engaging the public and their communities in the Segment Committee process

Members of CSC 4 are representatives of their local areas and see it as an important duty to keep their communities informed so the Segment Committee members speak with various groups in their area, including city councils, chambers of commerce and commissioners courts, about I-69 to give these groups updates on the progress of the Segment Committee and manage expectations of the progress of the corridor. In meeting with these groups, members encourage individuals to inform others in their community about the work and activities of the Segment Committee and of the future planning activities for I-69. Committee members have also sponsored smaller meetings in their local areas to discuss I-69 and some members provide information on the Segment Committee meetings for local newspapers.

Additional helpful public engagement and involvement activities

CSC 4 members note that they would like to have open house sessions for the public and would like additional media coverage with local papers, radio and television stations. It will be important that these public involvement efforts include railroads and stakeholders who may be impacted by and have information relevant in the development of an I-69 Corridor Program.

Preliminary CSC 4 Prioritization

CSC 4 members prepared a preliminary list of project priorities as a "snap shot" of current conditions which reflect interim priorities at this stage of the CSC process. The priorities are subject to change through further work of and review by the CSC. These results are not a commitment by

TxDOT to advance projects as currently ordered. The priorities may change in the future based on additional input, environmental approvals, and funding availability.

To develop the initial priorities, committee members independently ranked their top sections. The initial priorities were collectively discussed by the committee and members were afforded opportunities to submit a revised ranking of their preliminary priorities based upon the results of the discussion.

Some members of CSC 4 and 5 are concerned that the committees have fewer members representing the U.S. 281 corridor than the U.S. 77 corridor. Subsequently, members of CSC 4 agreed to identify the top four priorities for each of these corridors.

The CSC 4 members also stress that the Rio Grande Valley has historically been underserved by the existing transportation network in Texas and has missed out on economic opportunity and growth even though it is one of the larger population centers in the state. Members agree that upgrading both U.S. 77 and U.S. 281 to interstate quality is the ultimate priority goal for the region and members emphasize that the work be done in a parallel time frame.

The current CSC 4 priority sections are shown in **Figure 2**. Specifically, the following sections are currently noted as preliminary priorities for CSC 4:

U.S. 77 Priorities

- Upgrade from south of Lyford to Willacy/Kenedy County line
- Relief Route at Riviera
- Upgrade from Willacy/Kenedy County line to south of Riviera
- Upgrade from north of Riviera to south of Driscoll

U.S. 281 Priorities

- Relief Route to serve U.S. 59 and U.S. 281 at George West
- Upgrade from north of McAllen to south of Falfurrias
- Relief Route at Premont
- Upgrade from Brooks/Jim Wells County line to south of Premont

Collectively, the committee emphasizes a desire to see all sections of U.S. 77 and U.S. 281 that may currently meet interstate standard be designated as interstate highways and consider this to be an immediate objective for TxDOT and the Federal Highway Administration.

Additionally, committee members note the need to accelerate environmental study efforts along additional portions of these two corridors because in gaining environmental clearance, construction can begin once funding is available.

Prioritization Rationale

In establishing preliminary priorities, CSC 4 members noted a number of factors that they consider as rationale for selecting their priority segments. Rationale mentioned most often by committee members includes:

- Serves High Traffic and Truck Volumes
- Provides Emergency Evacuation
- Addresses Safety Concerns
- Improves Travel Times
- Provides Multi-modal Connections (Air, Sea, Rail)
- Serves International Border Crossings
- Serves Industrial and Intermodal Service
- Community Support
- Potential Alternative Funding Sources
- Connection with the new Sea Highway (Port of Brownsville, TX to Port of Manatee, FL)

Next Steps

As previously noted, the current priorities are preliminary and may be refined as the committee continues its efforts. Upcoming work of CSC 4 is anticipated to include the following activities:

- Reviewing order of magnitude cost estimates and funding opportunities
- Identifying limits of potential projects, and refining the CSC project priorities
- Discussing and planning public involvement activities

