

Schedule for widening U.S. Highway 171 revised  
Mansfield segment will impact residences, businesses.

[Vickie Welborn](#) / The Times Mansfield Bureau

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MANSFIELD - Recent revisions in the time line for widening U.S. Highway 171 to four lanes through Mansfield will give DeSoto Chamber of Commerce officials more time to scout out a new location.

Part of the project scheduled to be let in summer 2005 puts the recently remodeled chamber office in the path of U.S. Highway 84, which will be extended to tie into the new U.S. Highway 171 route.

"This building will get taken out," Darrell Goza, assistant district construction engineer with the state Department of Transportation and Development told chamber directors Tuesday. Hibernia Bank's drive-in next door also could lose one of its lanes.

A property owner has offered to donate land inside the city to the chamber for its future site, said Bob Church, chamber executive director. A decision where to relocate will have to be made by next year because that's when the state will begin acquiring rights of way.

Otherwise, local business leaders welcome the highway project because it could ease traffic flow. So far, only a few residences and businesses will be displaced to accommodate the realigned and wider highway.

The addition of lanes to U.S. Highway 171 from Lake Charles to Shreveport is funded through the state's TIMED program, which gets its money from a 4 cents-per-gallon motor fuel tax. The state last year sold bonds to accelerate construction of the remaining projects, meaning most will be completed by 2010 rather than 2030.

Robert Dugas, assistant engineering manager of project development for Louisiana TIMED Managers, said his company would be involved in 55 projects statewide. Other TIMED projects include U.S. Highway 165 from Lake Charles to Arkansas, U.S. Highway 167 from Alexandria to Arkansas via Ruston, several New Orleans highways, the Huey P. Long Bridge and a St. Francisville bridge.

"All are supposed to be completed by 2010," Dugas said.

The Mansfield part of the U.S. Highway 171 project, which begins where a recent widening project ends at Elam Bayou north of the city, should be completed in 2 1/2 years, Goza said.

It's likely there will be more activity sooner in Sabine Parish as U.S. Highway 171 projects progress northward, he said. A five-mile segment from Zwolle to Noble opened to traffic last week.

A time-consuming aspect of the Mansfield segment will be to fill the north end of a deep, heavily wooded ravine that snakes through the west side of the city. Early plans had called for construction of three elevated bridges, but that would have limited access and development, Goza said.

Mansfield business owner Harlon Blackmon had hoped the ravine could be saved. "It could have been a tourist attraction if money was spent on it. It's really a landmark, in my opinion."