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Grassroots America Calls for Public Accounting of Smith County Road Bond Projects

Tyler, Texas – Grassroots America, a statewide conservative public policy and citizen action group based in Smith County, Texas, today called for a full public accounting of Smith County Road Bond Projects, saying *“After receiving numerous complaints from Smith County citizens, we conducted an audit of Smith County Road Bond project documents. Our audit revealed that the Smith County Road Plan promised to the taxpayers is dramatically behind schedule and over budget. There appear to be examples of “completed” road surfaces that differ from the improvements promised. Some completed projects are already showing signs of deterioration. The lack of financial and operational transparency in scheduling these road bond projects and reporting to taxpayers is just flat out unacceptable. **Smith County taxpayers deserve better.** We call on the Smith County Commissioners Court to adopt a “business urgency” approach, work with the County Engineer to assemble all the facts and hold a public meeting in the very near future to inform citizens.”*

Background

In 2017, voters approved **\$39.6 Million** in bonds to finance deteriorating and substandard county road infrastructure – which by law – is a core responsibility of the Smith County Commissioners Court. Even adjusting for the COVID shutdown, it appears that some of the Phase I projects may not have been completed to the promised standards.

In 2021, a second bond for **\$45 Million** was approved by voters as the second phase of road infrastructure improvements.

Both bond proposals defined **the specific projects to be completed within three years** and provided the dates, road segments, and types of improvements that were scheduled.

In addition, the Smith County Commissioners Court **appropriated another \$13.5 Million** of our tax dollars to supplement the borrowed bond funds.

To summarize, Smith County taxpayers will shell out **more than \$100 Million** (when financing costs are added) to finally “fix” their roads. ***It is a reasonable expectation that in exchange for their tax dollars, Smith County citizens receive exactly what they were promised – nothing less!***

Have Smith County taxpayers received their money's worth?

Grassroots America conducted a review of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 Road Bond Project documents that were publicly available on the Smith County web site and other documents we received in response to a Public Information Act Request.

The analysis posed troubling findings in both the miles of roads repaired and the cost of repairs when compared to published approved project lists.

- The Phase 1 Road Bond Program provided \$39.5 million and proposed 376.5 miles of major reconstruction and widening, HMAC (Hot Mix Asphalt Concrete) overlay and reconstruction and miscellaneous improvements. **According to the Phase 1 Bond summary, the county spent all \$39.5 million to improve 204.5 miles of roadways, leaving a balance of 172 miles.**
- The Phase 2 Road Bond Program provided another \$45.0 million to be spent in FY23, FY24 and FY25. Approved projects specified another 282.2 miles of road improvements. The county is now nearly half-way through the project calendar. **The status report dated January 6, 2025, documents that just a third of the promised miles – 99.1 miles – have been completed. Only seventeen (17) additional miles are under contract and a mere seventeen (17) other miles are even planned to date!**
- To summarize, **\$98 million** in financial commitments have improved 478.8 miles of the 658.7 *promised* miles of improvements (a shortfall of 179.9 miles). **Just nineteen (19) months of the six-year road bond plan remains. Unfortunately, the County has not been transparent and forthcoming regarding either the performance shortfall or potential financial risk.**

In addition to apparent slippage in the schedule and cost overruns, a non-scientific review of the quality of improvements completed to date generate additional concerns. Segments of completed roadways are already showing deterioration. In addition, improvements in other segments do not appear adequate to handle the volume and type of traffic experienced. **Both issues indicate potential problems and financial exposure in the near future.**

Grassroots America is publicly reporting our findings and concerns in response to the citizen complaints we received. Our aim is to call attention to these increasingly serious issues, and to encourage a public accounting of the situation with a full discussion of solutions.

Much has changed since the project plans and bonds were approved. The County Engineer has been redirected to help oversee the courthouse construction project. Inflationary pressures have impacted both material and labor costs. Population and industrial growth have increased faster than projected. While these factors directly impact cost management, **these factors in no way excuse the lack of disclosure to the taxpayers. Smith County received \$44.5 million from the Biden Administration's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).** Reasonable questions arise regarding the use of this funding as well as the priorities the Smith County Commissioners Court placed on projects other than county roads.

Recommendations

Smith County citizens deserve and rightfully demand quality road infrastructure that provides safe and convenient transportation around the county. Today, Grassroots America petitions the Smith County Commissioners Court to:

- Provide the current status of funded road improvements, assess known concerns, summarize bond fund balances, specify any needed supplemental financing, and report a revised timeline to completion.
- Convene a **public workshop** that includes County Judge Neal Franklin, all four County Commissioners, the County Engineer, any required Road and Bridge staff, and the County Auditor to:
 - Vet and agree upon the County’s current ability to complete Phase 2 projects on time and on budget.
 - Prepare an updated project plan with dates and road segments through FY26.
 - Communicate the revised plans, dates to completion, and road standards to Smith County citizens ***the same way the road bond plan was “sold” to the voters – in community town hall meetings held around the county.***
- Assign responsibility to revise the county’s long-range Transportation Infrastructure Plan, which was instituted under former County Judge Nathaniel Moran. The multi-year plan should ensure that the County’s road infrastructure meets the scope, quality, and financing necessary to adequately address the projected needs of the taxpayers. The updated long-range plan must contain specific road construction, surface maintenance, and drainage standards to accommodate East Texas soils, weather conditions, and population density.
- Utilize the road facts collected to set budget priorities for the next fiscal year and to construct a Business Plan for the Smith County Commissioners Court. **This will set measurable performance expectations for the County’s governing body as well as demonstrate the Commissioners Court’s willingness to “lead by example.”**

Finally, the dedicated Smith County Road and Bridge Engineer and his employees deserve *the right tools, training, and consistent management* from the Smith County Commissioners Court. We are deeply concerned that Mr. Davis’s attention has been redirected from his job – the Smith County Road and Bridge Department – to the courthouse construction project.

It is time to right this ship, which is badly “off course.” ***Smith County citizens need to see competence and caring from the Smith County Judge and Commissioners.***



JoAnn Fleming, Executive Director
Acting President



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Chairman, Government Watchdog Committee