


Texas Safety Rest Area Program won **BEST PROGRAM** of AASHTO's CONTEXT SENSITIVE



AASHTO
Center for Environmental Excellence
Best Practices in Context Sensitive Solutions

2006 Competition



BEST PROGRAM, CO-WINNER:
Texas DOT Safety Rest Area Program

Transportation officials in Texas have launched a unique effort to ensure driver safety while promoting tourism and civic pride throughout the state. The Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) Safety Rest Area Program is creating the ultimate context sensitive solution for rest stops along the state's highways.

Going far beyond the traditional restrooms and parking facilities, TxDOT's Safety Rest Areas boast amenities more like a park or museum. Each rest area is designed to fit into its region with attractive structures, regional themes, exhibits, and information, educating travelers as well as providing a sense of pride to communities.

According to TxDOT, its new generation of safety rest area facilities were designed to blend with the natural beauty of the diverse Texas landscape. In addition to incorporating regional character, wherever possible the facilities themselves are located at scenic or historical sites. These key locations, along with informative exhibits, are a part of the state's goal of encouraging travelers to take breaks during long road trips.

At each facility, TxDOT worked to preserve community heritage and regional flavor through architectural aesthetics, protection of natural resources, and promotion of environmental sensitivities such as rainwater harvesting. Exhibits at each rest area provide safe travel tips and maps, and they interpret the history, culture, and the natural environment of the surrounding areas. As an added amenity, the facilities offer free wireless Internet access.

Regional Themes Emphasized

At the new Donley County Safety Rest Area on U.S. 287, for example, the railroad design theme reflects nearby Hedley's historic role as a "railroad hamlet" where cattle were loaded onto rail cars for transportation to distant markets. Interpretive



The design of the Donley County Safety Rest Area on U.S. 287 reflects a nearby town's historic role as a "railroad hamlet". Displays in the rest area lobby help interpret Donley County's local heritage.

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display kiosks provide visitors with a history lesson on the region, while the wireless Internet access lets travelers check their e-mail or browse the state's "Tex Treks" information website to view maps, events, and attractions. And playground facilities offer a needed respite to traveling children and their parents.

The new Hardeman County facility offers similar amenities and is designed to reflect the farming and ranching culture of northern Texas, while further south the Medina County facility incorporates water conservation features and emphasizes preservation of the Cypress groves along nearby streams.

Location, Functionality Are Key

Funded primarily through the federal Transportation Enhancements program, 21 new context sensitive facilities have been completed so far under the program with plans for 56 more.

Each facility varies in size and capacity based on average daily traffic data and future projections. Facilities were conveniently placed at approximately an hour's interval of highway traveling distance from each other to provide drivers needed breaks from continuous driving.

Separation of passenger car parking from truck parking areas at the new facilities reduces traffic accidents and preserves views of the surrounding natural landscapes. Facilities located in tornado-prone and coastal areas incorporate tornado/hurricane shelters and emergency power connections that can serve as safe shelters for travelers or as emergency command centers for government officials.

Collaborative Design

TxDOT's in-house team of architects and designers developed the concepts for the rest areas in consultation with TxDOT district offices and local communities. Public input helped designers understand the history, culture, architecture, natural features, and resources of the local areas.

Other agencies also partnered with TxDOT. The state Energy Conservation Office helped provide wind turbine generators at two safety rest areas located in windy portions of the state. Texas Parks and Wildlife provided ideas and graphics for exhibits on natural features and habitats. And reviews by the Texas Historical Commission have helped

project planners develop site plans that are relevant to the era that they represent.

In addition, TxDOT collaborated with local mayors, chambers of commerce, county officials, sheriffs, and other community members. As projects were planned and designed, TxDOT used a variety of tools to communicate with the public, including display boards and presentations with photos, architectural renderings, descriptive narratives, computer-aided-drafting (CAD) three-dimensional modeling and virtual tours.

The Medina County Safety Rest Area is built in the local Italian style.

State-of-the-art playground facilities provide a needed respite for traveling parents and their restless children.




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The design team also has developed an extensive web site that illustrates the program (<http://www.dot.state.tx.us/mnt/sra/default.htm>).

Connecting with Communities

When each new rest area is launched, it is introduced as the "front door" for the communities. By all accounts, the facilities have been a big hit, not only with visitors, but also with local residents.

Promotion of each region's unique features has helped invoke a sense of civic pride for those who live nearby.

The facilities often are seen as more of a community center, where local residents have hosted weddings, family reunions, and other functions. One facility recently hosted an Easter egg hunt, while another hosted gatherings of the Route 66 Antique Car Club. Children from nearby communities often can be seen enjoying the playground equipment at the new facilities.

The facilities also help to promote environment-friendly values, such as preserving and protecting native trees and habitats. Information on the local flora and fauna depicted in rest area displays helps to educate travelers as well as local residents.

The facilities often have been a source of inspiration to other states. In October 2004, TxDOT hosted the 3rd Bi-Annual National Safety Rest Area Conference. This event, sponsored by AASHTO's Subcommittee on Maintenance, Roadside and Environment Task Force, allowed transportation officials from many states to learn issues regarding rest area programs, including context sensitive design, green building solutions, and crime prevention through environmental design.

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The exterior design and interior displays at the Hardeman County Safety Rest Area follow an agrarian theme, reflecting the farming and ranching culture of northern Texas.

Interpretive displays of cotton farming, which has been the livelihood of local communities, provide visitors to the Hale County Safety Rest Area a look back in time. (All photos courtesy of TxDOT.)

TxDOT's context sensitive design approach gives each rest area facility a unique identity with safe, comfortable, convenient, and informative features that are inviting to travelers. The network of facilities encourages drivers to make regular stops and to rest during extended road trips, and local citizens take pride in these state facilities that represent their towns.
—Texas Department of Transportation

View from the CSS Competition Panel

TxDOT avoided the "cookie cutter" approach to rest areas and developed impressive designs that fit into and promote the context of each region. For example, Donley County's approach, which used children to help research the history of the area and develop a railroad hamlet theme, helped to develop a safety facility that is considered a destination as well as a source of civic pride. This is an excellent example of CSS that goes beyond traditional highway applications.




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