

Fatality renews pledge to fix road

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The death this weekend of Ron Willard has renewed efforts among Jal officials and state leaders to bring improvements to State Road 128.

Sen. Carroll Leavell, R-Jal, said that over the past few years the Legislature in Santa Fe has budgeted money to fix 128 only to see that money moved by the Highway and Transportation Department.

Leavell said he has grown so tired of this he is considering introducing a constitutional amendment to abolish the Highway and Transportation Commission and make the department directly answerable to the Legislature.

Whatever technique ultimately works, Leavell said he and others in Lea County would keep pressuring the state to improve 128.

"This has been a cause of mine from the time I was elected to now," Leavell said.

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people are going to have to get killed before they do something about it?'

Frank Gage
Former Jal city councilor

Like many in the Jal area, he sounded a note of frustration about the lack of progress on 128.

"Dealings with the Highway and Transportation Department have been more than a little frustrating," Leavell said.

Leavell noted that the highway has claimed several lives over the years, including Jal's police chief within the past 12 months.

Because of the condition of the road a

person can easily wreck their car even at relatively low speeds, and "if by chance run off the road, then there is no shoulder and you can lose control of your car at that point," Leavell said.

Frank Gage, a former Jal city councilor, has also led efforts to improve the highway.

Gage said he has taken legislative delegations out on the highway to show them the conditions, but all to no avail.

"What can we do to get them do something about that road?" Gage said. "They won't even listen to us on that State Road 128."

Gage also asked a question on many people's minds following the death of two Jal citizens in less than a year.

"How many more people are going to have to get killed before they do something about it?" Gage asked.

For her part Jal Mayor Clay Claiborn admits much of what she has to say about the Highway and Transportation

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Department's treatment of SR 128 "aren't fit to print."

She also noted that people from larger metropolitan areas don't understand how traumatic the unexpected death of a community member feels. For a town like Jal, Willard's death is more like the death of a family member.

"So I guess you could say Highway 128 has taken another member of our family," Claiborn said. "People from cities don't understand what a member of our community is. It's more family than just another citizen."

Claiborn said she and others from Jal had gone to the

Highway Commission asking for help "and found how unimportant we down here are in their world."

In particular Claiborn noted the town's school busses travel several thousand miles every year on that road.

"Our school kids travel about 15,000 miles on that road every year, but we're not important down here," Claiborn said.

Claiborn said the town had tried everything they could think of, from letter writing campaigns to personal appeals.

"I don't know what else we can do; you just want to throw up your hands and say why can't we be part of Texas; then we might get a highway," Claiborn said.