

This Week

Wednesday, March 21, 2001

FM 1960/SPRING/KLEIN

CROSSROADS

Shop may be muffled if underpass plan OK'd

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THERE'S nothing spectacular or unusual about the appearance of Ripley's Muffler & Brake Shop at the intersection of FM 1960 and Kuykendahl.

But for General Manager Tommy Ripley, his mother Joan Ripley and Tommy's 10 brothers and sisters, the place holds a lifetime of memories and is indeed special.

Opened as an Arco gas station in 1973 by the late Rodney Ripley, the shop has become a familiar sight to area residents. But major improvements at the intersection, which has long been a magnet for traffic snarls and accidents, are expected to force the closing of the shop in about two years.

Harris County and the Texas Department of Transportation plan to collaborate on a \$15 million project to convert Kuykendahl into an underpass at FM 1960. Work would begin in early 2004 and take about two years to complete, Harris County Precinct 4 project coordinator Pamela Rocchi said.

If the county buys Ripley's for construction right-of-way, the shop could be relocated. But family members say memories are firmly imbedded within the cinderblock walls.

"I feel a need to fight for this road project not going through, simply because of the history and the pieces of my heart and life that are here," said Joan Ripley, 64. "I know progress is progress, but sometimes I feel there are other ways they could solve the traffic problem without eliminating this shop."

By all accounts, what makes Ripley's special is not that it has been a landmark of sorts for nearly three decades. The appeal of the shop is that customers find a slice of Mayberry in the midst of the fourth-largest city in the United States.

"My dad was from a town of 400 people, and my mom was from a 'big town of 4,000,'" Tommy Ripley said. "They had the small-town attitude and way of doing business. People would run out of gas and have no money. My dad would just ask them to write an IOU."

Customers came to enjoy the warm reception so much that they began stopping by to shoot the breeze and drink a cup of coffee, he said. That tradition continues to this day.

"Every day it's like a high school reunion in here," Ripley said.

Lester Ubanoski, 63, said he has been a customer of the establishment since 1973.

"I knew Tommy's daddy real well. He was a real honest guy," Ubanoski said. "When he told you something, you could take it to the bank. I think Tommy and those boys are the same. Anytime I need something done, I stop in, talk with them and see how their mom is doing."

Ubanoski said he is opposed to any



Bob Edwards photo

Tom, Joan and David Ripley, from left, are hoping the construction of an underpass does not force their muffler shop from its current location.

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Joan Ripley

road project that would force Ripley's to move.

"I hate to see that," he said. "They've been there a long time. They are people you can trust and don't have to worry about them doing you wrong. That means a lot to me."

Ripley said other options are available that would improve traffic flow without moving his shop.

He favors building double left-turn lanes and dedicated right-turn lanes, which might require some of his parking lot to be taken — but not so much that he couldn't remain in business

at the current location.

"Traffic would flow smoothly along FM 1960 if the traffic signals were better synchronized," Ripley said.

"The one thing I emphasize is comparing FM 1960 to Westheimer," he said. "Westheimer doesn't have any underpasses, and it has more traffic. But it flows much better because the signals are better synchronized."

Rocchi said the problem is not with the signals but with the high volume of vehicles. However, the underpass plan is not yet a certainty, she said.

"Public opposition can kill this project," Rocchi said. "We'll know something definitive within the next 60 to 120 days."

Rocchi continues to argue against the underpass project, but he admits that stopping the project is unlikely.

"There's always a silver lining," he said. "If the project goes through and we have to move, we'll make the best of it. Ripley's isn't going away. Maybe I can build a new shop, add tire service and create a real office instead of being in a storage room."