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POWERED



Really bugged

The endangered Bone Cave Harvestman, a spiderlike creature, is impeding progress on State Highway 45 North in Williamson County. Recently discovered caves are in the path of the project; the caves are the Harvestman's habitat. The bug measures 1.4 to 2.7 millimeters in length.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO / WILLIAM H. BEECH

SH 45 hits tiny bump

Endangered spiderlike creature throws wrench into road project

BY GISELLE GREENWOOD
AUSTIN BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

A highway envisioned as a major economic boost for Williamson County has hit a huge roadblock — and it's actually a tiny creature.

The Texas Department of

Transportation uncovered two caves while constructing State Highway 45 North. More critical was the inhabitant of the caves, a blind spiderlike creature called a Bone Cave Harvestman.

As a resident of the U.S. Endangered Species list, the Harvestman is protected from disturbances such as highway projects. That has left TxDOT awaiting word from the U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service on how, or whether, to proceed on SH 45, the northern extension of MoPac Expressway.

That doesn't mean the overall project is delayed, TxDOT spokesman John Hurt says. Hurt says the work has shifted to other areas not inhabited by protected creatures.

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Manufacturer expanding

Touch International relocating to N. Austin, plans to hire at least 25

BY GISELLE GREENWOOD
AUSTIN BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

Round Rock-based Touch International Inc. is on the move.

The company is relocating to a 25,000-square-foot manufacturing plant and headquarters on 2222

Rundberg Lane in North Austin, a space that was occupied by 3M Co.'s Touch Systems Inc. subsidiary until July 2002.

The new location will provide five times more space. The company is vacating its Round Rock headquarters and its Hutto manufacturing site.

President and CEO Michael Woolstrum says the company is taking advantage of a building that

had housed another manufacturer of touch screens.

"It just made more sense to move into a facility that already had the infrastructure in place," he says. "It's a plug-and-play building."

"The new facility will give us more room to grow," Woolstrum says.

Touch International plans to add

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SH 45: Discovery of caves hampers work on project in Williamson County

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"We did research prior to building the road, and most of the major obstacles have been found. These caves are relatively small," Hurt says. "We'll do whatever they [the Fish and Wildlife Service] say is prudent. We're certainly considering the impact on the species and the environment."

Hurt says TxDOT bought 30 acres adjacent to the project before construction began to offer as a preserve if such an environmental hurdle arose. He says TxDOT might have enough such land to go forward, but the project still depends on the Fish and Wildlife Service's review.

"We've found 13 caves total since beginning this project," Hurt says. "Caves are fairly common in Central Texas."

Williamson County Commissioner David Hays says the county is working with TxDOT on the environmental dilemma.

"We've talked about them and we're aware of the situation," Hays says. "Hopefully, we can help them out."

"Everything west of I-35 always encounters environmental issues," Hays says. "This is not unusual."

SH 45 is a project environmental groups such as the Austin-based Save Our Springs Alliance have opposed since the outset.

The northern section would run from west of US 183 to SH 130 and could open that area to further development. Another section is in southern Travis County and provides access from South MoPac to I-35.

In July, SOS petitioned to have another spider, *Cicurina Cueva*, listed as an endangered species. The spider was found in one cave near the planned SH 45 South.

At the time, SOS said it opposed that section of SH 45 because the rise in traffic would increase pollution in Barton Springs and wreak havoc on the spider's habitat.

Austin environmental consultant Steve Paulson says construction projects in Austin run into similar problems.

"It's very difficult to determine where these caves are," Paulson says.

Before construction, TxDOT surveyed the land to find any visible karst, or cave, features, such as visible holes on the land surface. That process didn't reveal the current controversial caves because they didn't have airflow and weren't visible from

the surface.

The Bone Cave Harvestman lives in dark, low-humidity habitats. It measures 1.4 to 2.7 millimeters in length and resides in the Southwest. It's uncertain how many exist.

Thirteen miles of the toll road SH 45 North are under construction, according to TxDOT. SH 45 is part of the \$2.9 billion Central Texas Turnpike Project, which includes 65 miles of new toll roads — SH 45 North, MoPac and the first 49 miles of SH 130.

The roadway should be ready in 2007, no matter what other obstacles are encountered, Hurt says.

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TOUCH: Manufacturer relocating to N. Austin, planning to add workers

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at least 25 people to its workforce in early 2004, mostly in manufacturing in Austin.

Nationwide, the company employs about 50 people. Workers outside Texas are sales representatives. Customers include the Air Force and Prentke Romich Co., a provider of communication devices for people with severe disabilities.

Meanwhile, Woolstrum says Touch International is in "advanced acquisition discussions" with an undisclosed Asian company.

With that deal, Touch International's staff would explode to 400 employees worldwide. The deal could happen by the end of the year, Woolstrum says.

"The key thing is we're not letting go of U.S. jobs, we're adding them,"

Woolstrum says.

Although no one is being laid off as part of the relocation, Round Rock and Hutto are losing major employers.

"Every company and job in Round Rock is important, and we hate to see any company leave the city," says Nancy Yawn, Round Rock's economic development director. "However, the company and jobs will remain in the region, which is still a benefit to Round Rock and our citizens."

Touch International's actions in Central Texas contradict the strategies of most companies, says Amy Holloway, vice president of economic development at Austin economic research firm Angelou Economic Advisors Inc.

"In the past five years, Round Rock has been more aggressive in economic development initiatives than Austin has,"

Holloway says. "You can see the result of that in the business expansion Round Rock has seen over the past couple of years."

Holloway says Austin's population has actually declined, whereas surrounding cities, such as Round Rock, have experienced double-digit population growth, indicating that people are flocking to outer suburbs.

"That trend is expected to continue, and where population goes, so does business," Holloway says. "I think Round Rock will be very successful in its economic development in the next five to 10 years."

Founded in 2002, Touch International designs and manufactures touch screen displays and components. That technology can be found in an array of devices, from

medical equipment to retail signature capture devices.

The company plans to attack the kiosk, gaming and lottery markets with its recently released Digital Ink product.

Digital Ink is a thin, form-fitting touch screen capable of stylus, finger and gloved-hand input that attempts to eliminate accidental input made from the pressure of a user's knuckles or palm. The product enables any glass or plastic surface to become a touch screen, such as a store window, bullet-proof glass or a tabletop.

Research group Market On estimates the touch screen market is valued at \$1 billion and projects annual growth to continue at about 22 percent through 2005.

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