

**Information Kiosks/
Texas Travel Host for
Safety Rest Areas and Travel Information Centers**

Andrew Skadberg, Yongxia Skadberg Texas A&M University

Andy Keith, Texas Dept. of Transportation

Doris Howdeshell, Texas Dept. of Transportation

James Kimmel, Southwest Texas State University

Section 1—Introduction and Overview

Travelers have questions they need answered. And typically they don't know much about the places they are traveling through. This is going to change! The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is giving travel in Texas a "face-lift"! The Safety Rest Areas are being revitalized and the new *Texas Travel Host* system will provide the answers to traveler's questions.

The purpose of Texas Travel Host is to provide a complete "package" of answers to questions that traveler's might have while also providing customized information about the places they are traveling through. For Texas, the intent of Texas Travel Host is to be the best hosts to our visitors that we can be while we also do a better job of "Marketing Texas" and all that it has to offer. In addition, the kiosks can provide dynamic, interesting and timely information to users at locations where it is not practical to provide qualified staffing for this purpose.

A traveler only needs to see one of the newly designed Safety Rest Areas to get excited about how it will change travel in the state. The major emphasis of the rest area revitalization is to have the architecture "blend into" the local regions, their heritage and their culture, while at the same time taking the facilities into the 21st century.

The next question is "How can we satisfy traveler's insatiable curiosity and need for up-to-the-minute information?" The answer is *Texas Travel Host*! Texas Travel Host will bring our ability to provide important travel information up to the same level as the exciting new TxDOT Safety Rest Areas. Traveler's characteristics are changing and our new "customers" are technology savvy. Texas Travel Host not only can answer our customer's questions, it can also enhance our ability to address several other important issues that are facing the tourism industry, our communities, and citizens in the State. Some of these are discussed in more detail below.

Wouldn't it be exciting to have the state's rest areas be a point of pride in their nearby communities. And wouldn't it be exciting to have TxDOT Safety Rest Areas become a "Hub" for community and regional tourism development. Texas Travel Host could make this possibility a reality.

Grass-roots Networked Structure of the Texas Travel Host system

A cornerstone of Texas Travel Host is that the "content" of each Texas Travel Host kiosk would be developed and maintained by regional groups (local COC, CVB's, etc.) who live near the TxDOT facilities. This would turn a government sponsored project into a

community grassroots based effort. The actual information and system structure, however, will be housed in a central location (initially Texas A&M University). This design distributes responsibility of developing and maintaining the content to grassroots groups who should be one of the ultimate beneficiaries of the system—the other is the traveling public. Housing the structure of the system in a central location minimizes system management challenges. The information that is provided will promote tourism in the areas where they are located. Therefore it makes sense that these area communities should be responsible for gathering and updating the information (*details of this process is discussed on page 7*). The network infrastructure (a central online database) would be managed by Texas Travel Host.

The following items are examples of the type of information that will be provided at each location:

- Tourist information
- Weather
- Local events
- Road conditions
- Route information
- Safety Information
- User surveys
- Email
- Map dispensers
- TxDOT Information
- Missing children notices
- Flora and Fauna of the area
- Special interests concerning local industry

“Killing Two Birds with One Stone?”

Texas Travel Host (TTH) brings together two “customers” and helps each satisfy the others needs—communities struggling economically with a need to promote their areas to the traveling public, and travelers in the state who need important travel information and ways to find tourism opportunities. The Texas Travel Host system accomplishes this but will satisfy several larger goals for the State of Texas, its citizens, and the people that are visiting the State, a few of these include:

Ease Traveler’s Travel Anxieties

- Texas Travel Host will provide important safety and security information and to potentially reduce traffic fatalities and ensure that traveler’s concerns are minimized
 - The highest incidence of traffic fatalities is for males age 18-24, this same group would be a primary audience for the kiosk technologies. Important “pop-up” messages about DUI or other traffic safety could be incorporated to remind young drivers about these issues.
 - After September 11, 2001 we are all aware of dramatically increased travel anxieties. Providing important, up-to-date information is important showing that the State is performing its due diligence to address the public’s concerns. This information cannot be provided in a timely fashion through traditional display materials.

Create Tourism Marketing Opportunities for Communities and Businesses

- Texas Travel Host will provide communities a way to attract travelers to spend some time in their region. Marketing for these areas is constantly a challenge. Texas Travel Host kiosks at TxDOT Safety Rest Areas would provide useful information to travelers and create a new vehicle to reach potential customers who at the present time are literally driving by with very little knowledge about the areas they are passing by.

Not Create a New Government Agency or Bureaucracy

- Texas Travel Host will develop a mechanism that does not require that any state agency add an additional function or responsibility to facilitate the creation of these regional tourism resource centers. The design of the Texas Travel Host system simply facilitates gathering information and providing a network for inputting, accessing and updating the information. The majority of content production and management will be the responsibility of the areas where the Safety Rest Areas are located.

Foster Collaboration and Partnerships in Communities

- One of the primary responsibilities of Texas Cooperative Extension in the Department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences is to facilitate the formation of tourism “partnerships” to enhance coordination among communities in the state. The technology that supports Texas Travel Host, Internet based databases, provides a mechanism that supports regional collaboration and coordination. The activities performed to organize the “content” of each travel kiosk could potentially result in the formation of regional partnerships like those that have already been forming in parts of the state (Southwest Texas Tourism Partnership, Trans-Pecos Tourism Partnership, Big Bend Tourism Council, etc.).

Collect Important Information About Tourism’s Impact in Texas

- Embedded in the Texas Travel Host technology are simple ways to capture important information about users of the system. Several mechanisms can be developed, including Tourism Market Match and Texas INFRONT to gather important information about tourism in the State. In addition, this information will be invaluable to researchers interested in studying tourism.

Section 2--The “Nuts and Bolts” of Texas Travel Host

In the following section the proposed initial partners and their respective responsibilities are described. Following that is a detailed description of the resources that will be included in Texas Travel Host that were outlined. The last section provides a detailed description of the proposal to facilitate organizing communities, businesses, attractions and interpretive resources that will be the primary product of Texas Travel Host.

Project Coordination and Funding

TxDOT would be the primary sponsor and ultimate coordinator of the Texas Travel Host kiosk system. TxDOT has agreed to furnish \$3800 / kiosk of support to develop the Texas Travel Host system. Initially the system is proposed to be pilot tested in 4 locations (2 rest area sites).

- On State Highway 287 in Hardeman county (North and Southbound) near Quana, Texas
- On I-40 (mm 129) in Donely county (Eastbound) Gray county (Westbound) between Mclean and Lela, Texas

For the pilot tests, these funds would cover the costs of hardware and other system expenses (satellite, cabinets for standing kiosks, plexiglass or other limited facilities). Additional support would be required for developing the various protocols, and actual coordination with communities gathering information or to build the online resources such as Web pages, databases and programming that support the system. Many of these resources have already been developed by Texas Cooperative Extension in the Dept. of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University. These costs will likely be recouped if more of the Texas Travel Host kiosks were brought online (@\$3800/kiosk). Texas A&M University can provide coordination for the project implementation. However, strategies to provide additional funding and continued support of the project need to be developed. Some possibilities might include:

- Having communities pay nominal fees for a Texas Travel Host kiosk. *This strategy could have an additional benefit by legitimizing local “buy-in” and a commitment to be a vested partner.*
- Developing a nominal fee structure for businesses to use the system (mandatory, but a fee structure needs to be developed).
- Soliciting private companies to “sponsor” the project. Careful consideration should be given how this approach could occur. First and foremost the interest of TxDOT is to provide a quality product and service to the traveling public. Commercialization is to be avoided. (Public Broadcasting could provide a useful example. Two initial ideas could be AAA or American Express.)

Various components and services provided by Texas Travel Host would be enhanced by working with other agencies and private partners. However, to ensure that the project does not get bogged down and that it moves forward in a timely fashion, these partnerships should be considered carefully and limited in scope. With input from too many partners, the focus and success of the project could be jeopardized. Initial partners should include:

- **Texas Cooperative Extension (TCE)**
Texas Cooperative Extension in collaboration with the Dept. of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences will be providing many of the resources (*Texas INFRONT* and *Tourism Market Match*, etc.) that provide the system structure for Texas Travel Host. In addition, the technical expertise and experience necessary to facilitate the coordination of the project matches the mission of Texas Cooperative Extension. The past efforts of Texas Cooperative Extension in the Department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences provide the foundation of Texas Travel Host and its integration into regional tourism development efforts. Additionally, TCE has a network of Extension agents and specialists that can provide critical community contacts to support the development of the regionally based Texas Travel Host kiosks. These local TCE contacts could work closely with TxDOT staff who are also located throughout the State.
- **Texas Economic Development (TxED)**
TxED would provide information for developing the Texas Travel Host Web based resources that would compliment the TravelTex.Com Web site. Also, the Market Texas Tourism research branch will provide guidance on developing the surveys that will be conducted from Texas Travel Host. Currently the Department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University is conducting numerous research projects for TxED so additional coordination should be minimal.
- **Texas Parks and Wildlife Department**
TPWD has a significant role in tourism efforts in the State. This agency could provide valuable assistance in gathering local interpretive and natural resource information for communities to draw upon as they develop their tourism products. Additionally, the state parks located near the rest areas should be closely tied to the TxDOT Safety Rest Areas.
- **Texas Historical Commission**
Like TPWD the THC has a significant role in tourism efforts related to the heritage of the State. This agency could provide valuable assistance to the communities as they gather local interpretive information for communities to draw upon as they develop their tourism products. Additionally, the historical sites located near the rest areas should be closely tied to the TxDOT Safety Rest Areas.
- **Texas Commission on the Arts**
The TCA is another important resource for the development of linkages to community's arts activities and events. The TCA has developed some innovative resources and assistance to improve coordination and promotion of the arts across the state.
- **Southwest Texas State University (SWT), the Center for Nature and Heritage Tourism (CNHT)**
The CNHT has focused on helping the State to develop and understand the importance of interpretive materials for tourism development. Tying the Safety Rest Areas to the places where they are located is of utmost concern for TxDOT. The Center for Nature & Heritage Tourism will provide valuable guidance and

develop resources to assist the International Tourism Center to work with communities to develop quality interpretive materials for their Texas Travel Host kiosks.

- **Other public and Private Partners**

A variety of other agencies play a part in tourism development in the State. Private non-profit groups should also provide resources and assistance when appropriate, however, defining their responsibilities preliminarily would likely complicate the process of getting Texas Travel Host in place. The additional agencies and partners might include:

- Texas Department of Agriculture
- Office of Music, Film, Television and Multimedia
- Texas General Land Office
- Texas Department of Public Safety
- Texas State Preservation Board
- Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center
- Other locally coordinated partnerships, where appropriate

Below is a brief detailed description of the information and resources that would be provided by Texas Travel Host.

Tourist information (*see discussion below under “Customized Information to be gathered and updated by local partners”*). **Texas INFRONT** developed by Texas Cooperative Extension in the Dept. of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University can be easily adapted to accommodate this part of Texas Travel Host.

This information will be organized by local groups (Chamber of Commerce, CACVB, etc.) and would include detailed information about attractions, accommodations, services, etc., but will be provided in a standardized format at all facilities.

Weather Information

There are a number of weather information sources available on the Web. Research should identify the most accurate, reliable, and usable source for this information. Currently, however, the National Weather Service has a Web site that can provide all the necessary travel information. <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/>

Local events

As part of the Texas Travel Host approach, and efforts through the Texas Cooperative Extension, this service would be tied to local areas. Keeping the information up-to-date would be the responsibility of the local entities that are coordinating the kiosk(s) information gathering process. (this approach has been successfully developed by a company in Wisconsin).

Road conditions

TxDOT Expressway provides information about road conditions across the state. Other resources could be evaluated for providing more accurate local information.

<http://www.dot.state.tx.us/hcr/main.htm>

Route information

The Texas Department of Transportation should be able to provide this information. Local entities might provide detailed information about how to get to regional attractions. In addition we might enter an agreement with Mapquest to provide travel information services.

Safety Information

This information should be researched and consolidated for highway travel in general and related to local area conditions. At the present time the TxDOT provides safety information on its Web site, however, this information should reviewed and consolidated for quick access to the most important issues while traveling. The Office for Homeland Security would likely be a good resource for this area. This information would likely be fairly static but be based on the best available information.

Traveler and user surveys

Specifically this information would be based on *Tourism Market Match* and the travel surveys being hosted by the Department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University. Currently Texas A&M University is conducting standardized state research for Texas Economic Development. The questions that TxDOT would like to answer regarding their facilities and services would be blended into current travel research methods. This information would provide valuable information about tourism activities in the state.

Email

As a normal function of any Web based application an email program would be included to provide visitors a way to send a “virtual postcard” to friends and family.

Map dispensers and detailed regional information printing capabilities

As a reward for completing a short survey, system users could request a Texas map or print out maps, directions or other interpretive information about the area they are traveling in.

TxDOT Information

Promoting the activities of TxDOT and the other partners, will be an important part of promoting how travel is supported through collaborative efforts between many public and private partnerships.

Missing children notices

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children <http://www.missingkids.org/> , or Nations Missing Children Organization <http://www.nmco.org/>

Customized Information to be gathered and updated by local partners

One of the unique features of the Texas Travel Host system is that there is an opportunity to facilitate the formation of local “tourism” regions that will help communities provide a better tourism product to their customers. This is very important part of the TxDOT Travel Host system concept because it is what will make the system unique and create a quality product for visitors to the state. Essentially two sets of information will fulfill this obligation:

- 1) information about where, how and when people can get to the tourism attractions, accommodations and services in the area,
- 2) Interpretive information, or “telling the story” of these places.

This approach aligns with TxDOT’s current revamping the Safety Rest Areas throughout the State. Major efforts have gone in to creating “unique” facilities that blend with the regional architecture where the Safety Rest Areas are located. Developing 21st Century technology based “Information Centers” will be an important compliment to these efforts.

Both of these travel information items and the proposed processes to develop them are described below

Attractions, accommodations and services

Much of this information is already available through local chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, or even the local phone book. However, it very likely is not consolidated specifically related to tourism. It would be the primary responsibility of the partner communities to spearhead this effort, with guidance from Texas A&M University and the Texas Department of Transportation. This effort would potentially have four benefits in areas that help address some of the major economic development issues

- 1) help communities better identify and organize tourism products and opportunities in their area,
- 2) facilitate the formation of a specific group of people that could guide “regional” tourism development activities,
- 3) rally people in the area to be more involved in developing this segment of their economy, and
- 4) provide a “product” back to their community that they could showcase as an accomplishment. Better tourism in an area benefits the local citizens too.

To accomplish this task a methodology for gathering the information using community groups and resources would be developed. The information gathered would include businesses, accommodations, attractions and other tourism related information. Potentially we could partner with the Wisconsin company that has been operating local tourism kiosk based networks. Their system supports travelers to identify attractions, accommodations and services, and to make reservations. The Texas Travel Host system will be designed so the local businesses will keep the information up-to-date rather than Texas A&M University managing the information. Information can be submitted online by individuals from the field and be presented to travelers in an appealing format using a

template. This approach will be a modified use of the *Texas INFRONT*, a system that has already been developed at Texas A&M University. Controlled, log-in, access will allow businesses to update information regularly.

Proposed Approach for Developing Local Interpretive Materials (provided by Dr. James Kimmel with the Center for Nature & Heritage Tourism)

Purpose:

To develop a process to facilitate community-based tourism and interpretation via TXDOT rest areas.

Opportunity:

TXDOT's new rest area facilities offer the opportunity for communities to develop nature and heritage tourism activities and attractions that will help diversify local economies and will help establish a sense of community identity and pride.

Concept:

In many respects the “product” of nature and heritage tourism is interpretation – telling the stories of the landscape. The newly designed highway rest stops that feature regional architecture are a tremendous venue for such interpretation. However, the cost of professional preparation of interpretative materials for all rest stops in the state would be very high. Moreover, hiring professionals would forfeit the opportunity to involve local citizens and establish a sense of “ownership” regarding the rest stops.

Local people can tell the stories of their own place with more authenticity than a professional brought in from outside the region. They know the history. They know the best views and most interesting places to visit.

The process of developing the interpretive materials also serves as the basic planning for local nature and heritage tourism. Local tourism planning involves (1) identifying potential attractions, (2) assessing the suitability of the potential attractions, (3) developing a theme or themes that “packages” the potential attractions, (4) providing directional information to visitors, and (5) providing interpretive information for each attraction. All of these steps can be done while developing a local “guidebook.” The guidebook becomes a tangible expression of the tourism potential for the region.

The end-product of this process will be (1) digital displays in the rest stop that will inform visitors about the attractions of the region, and why those attractions are worthy of their visit, and (2) the basis of a tourism development plan for the region.

Method:

Step 1: Select appropriate hardware and software and develop the format template for digital interpretive displays.

Step 2: Develop prototype interpretive displays to refine the product of Step 1 and to demonstrate the method.

Step 3: From the prototype development process, construct a step-by-step method that can be used with local residents.

Step 4: Select a rest stop region for a pilot study and form a working committee of local residents in the rest stop region.

Step 5: Assist the working committee to develop interpretive material for their rest stop and to develop a tourism plan for their region. Monitor the process, determining problem areas and stumbling blocks in the process.

Step 6: Revise the process based on the results of Step 5.

Step 7: Select another rest stop region for a “hands-off” pilot study in which residents go through the development process with little input from the project staff.

Step 8: Revise the process based on the results of Step 7.

Step 9: Package the process with appropriate guidelines and computer-based support.

This information could be submitted online and be formatted using a template. Builds on the Texas INFRONT system.

More information about the Kiosks

Kiosks will be either freestanding or wall mounted. They will be situated at locations observable by existing video surveillance security cameras. Information will be displayed on a monitor observable by bystanders. It will be capable of playing audio and video messages. An onboard camera will capture the user’s image and display it onscreen. Users can pose for the camera to generate a picture with a regionalized theme. This picture can accompany an email message sendable to recipients concerned about the users’ travels.

A keyboard and/or touch screen will facilitate user interaction with the information. Some of the information will be customized for the specific location and will remain static. Other information will be kept up to date using Internet access. Users can respond to changeable survey questions and provide feedback concerning the facilities. Upon completion of the survey, their information will be saved with their photo. As a reward, they can request a free Texas map dispensed by the kiosk.