

# Star-Telegram

## Federal loan will unplug Fort Worth's I-35W bottleneck

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The final piece of funding needed for the \$1.63 billion expansion of Interstate 35W from just north of downtown Fort Worth to North Tarrant Parkway -- north of the U.S. 287 split -- is in sight.

Can we get a hallelujah from every driver who's been stuck in I-35W gridlock while offering a "thank you" to the federal government's Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement Tuesday that the North Texas I-35W project is one of five in the nation selected to receive a loan that will allow the expansion improvements to be repaid with favorable interest rates and over a longer time than other forms of debt.

The I-35W project will receive \$415 million, nearly a third of the federal dollars available in the entire infrastructure program. The Texas Transportation Commission is expected to approve another \$150 million this week. Construction on four new toll lanes as well as rebuilding the existing free lanes should begin within a year. Completion is estimated at 2018.

It may be a bitter pill for some North Texans to swallow, but living in one of the fastest growing regions in the nation means a lot more people in a lot more vehicles are trying to get from point A to point B. The tax-funded road system, built solely with dollars generated through gasoline taxes and other vehicle-related fees, was long ago overwhelmed by that growth.

Private toll roads and those built through public-private partnerships are about the only way communities can complete new roads in less than a generation -- or two.

"This expansion will open up the northern part of Fort Worth for more retail and commercial opportunities while giving freer flow of traffic for residents to connect with the center city and with the southern portion of the city," said Fort Worth Councilman Sal Espino, whose district extends along I-35W from downtown to north of Texas 114. Toll road use will be voluntary. Those who want to shave some time off their commute will pay for the privilege, especially during peak traffic hours when "congestion pricing" will kick in.

The construction phase of any highway project is no picnic, but once dirt starts turning on I-35W, keep in mind that the proliferation of orange cones is temporary.

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