

Downtown Fort Worth's I-35W redo wraps up ahead of schedule — and as toll lanes get a bad rap

The final phase of the \$1.6 billion North Texas Express freeway project opens Thursday.

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FORT WORTH — Like many North Texas transportation projects, Interstate 35W through downtown Fort Worth couldn't be improved fast enough, officials say.

Fort Worth has [the fourth-most new residents of any city in the country](#), and 132,000 vehicles traverse I-35W — which was built in 1959 when the city was about a third its current size — every day.

Transportation relief will come Thursday when the last segment of the \$1.6 billion highway redo, known as the North Tarrant Express project, opens two months earlier than scheduled — and perhaps decades earlier than the region could have paid for it with tax dollars alone.

But it could be among the last mega-projects funded partially with private dollars as lawmakers have increasingly rejected the funding method for transportation needs.

The anti-toll attitude didn't stop regional officials from declaring Wednesday that the public-private partnership was a success for Fort Worth.

"A project of this magnitude could have taken up to 25 years if built traditionally," said Scott Hall of the Fort Worth district of the Texas Department of Transportation.

The project was completed under a comprehensive-development agreement, called a CDA. In such an agreement, the private developer invests money upfront to get the project moving. The result is that construction isn't piecemeal like older projects, and roads are built quicker.

The flip side is that drivers can pay extra, in the form of tolls, for congestion relief. The private investor is then reimbursed with the toll revenue.

The Legislature approved the North Tarrant Express CDA in 2009. When construction started in 2014, the stretch of I-35W was the sixth-most congested corridor in the state.

The I-35W project added two tolled TEXpress lanes in each direction, auxiliary lanes and some frontage roads. Drivers can pay to use the TEXpress lanes or choose the rebuilt — but potentially crowded — free lanes without being tolled.



Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes said Wednesday that managed lane projects work because drivers have a choice.

"When we're talking about a managed lane project, they work," said Gary Fickes, Tarrant County commissioner and chairman of the Regional Transportation Council. "It gives drivers a choice."

But no CDAs have been approved in the last two sessions in Austin. Some politicians fought against adding toll lanes to the LBJ East project. And only two other CDA projects — the Midtown Express in northeastern Dallas County

and the second phase of I-35E improvements north of LBJ Freeway into Denton County — remain in North Texas' construction pipeline.

The Legislature has instead helped create new funding sources, known as Prop 1 and Prop 7. In 2014, voters statewide dedicated taxes from oil and natural gas production to transportation projects. The next year, another statewide election put some sales and use tax revenue into transportation.

But Michael Morris, regional transportation director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said TxDOT cannot meet the needs solely on current resources, including those new revenue streams. Project costs also continue to rise — topped by an \$8 billion estimated cost to unclog traffic in the capital city itself.

That is why Morris doesn't think CDAs are dead.

"We'll see the legislature bring the tool back again," Morris said. "There's no way 35 is ever going to be done in Austin without private investment. And I think people in our region recognize the value of that project. We're going to be strong supporters."

The point of the projects in North Texas, Morris said, is "connecting the economic centers and getting that to drive the economy."

"It's one project, but the vision is a system of transportation, basically in the backbone of the region: downtown Fort Worth, going out to DFW (International) Airport, going to downtown Dallas," he said.

Other local leaders also say CDAs have been good for business. Land value along the freeways increases, and existing businesses near the roads aren't suffocated by extended years of construction.

"We're getting a 4-for-1 return on our dollar," with the North Texas Express, Fort Worth City Council member Jungus Jordan said.

The North Tarrant Express project's final segment — from I-30 to 28th Street — opens Thursday. The segment south of I-820 to just beyond 28th Street opened in the spring, six months ahead of schedule. The northern half of the project, from outside the Interstate 820 loop to the I-35W split with U.S. Highway 287, opened in late 2016.

In a few spots, where ramps to access the toll lanes were late additions, construction will continue through the end of the year. But all free and toll lanes of the I-35W itself will be open.

