

Daily drives to change as road projects end

by Judy Wiley
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Photo by Judy Wiley

The DFW Connector opens this month and tolling is expected to start in 2014. The view here is International Parkway toward DFW Airport from westbound Hwy. 114.

Dynamic toll lanes coming to key highways

New, managed toll roads, reconfigured free lanes or both will surround area cities over the next two years, starting this fall with completion of the DFW Connector.

Three massive road projects that have been underway for several years—the Connector in Grapevine, North Tarrant Express to the west and LBJ Express to the east—are expected to be finished by late 2015.

The major impacts on drivers in Grapevine, Colleyville, Southlake and Westlake: All three roads eventually will have managed toll lanes and some exits on free lanes are changing.

For example, the Main Street exit off William D. Tate Avenue in Grapevine is gone now—motorists continue north on Hwy. 121 to Main Street.

“We’re providing a lot more choice now for drivers, more opportunities for faster travel,” said Lisa Walzl of TxDOT, which is managing the Connector.

On all the projects, local residents who do not need or want to use toll lanes should benefit because the free lanes will be relieved of through traffic, said Robert Hinkle, spokesman for Cintra, the company responsible for building and operating both North Tarrant Express and LBJ Express.

The number of free lanes stays the same or greater on all three projects.

“At the end of the day, if we all do our job correctly, the end result benefit is quality of life for you and me, because we’re not sitting in traffic,” Hinkle said.

NTE and LBJ Express

Managed or dynamic toll lanes, called TEXpress lanes, are coming to 13.3 miles of the LBJ Express (I-635); and 13.5 miles of the North Tarrant Express (Hwy. 121/183, Loop 820).

The goal is to keep traffic moving at 50 mph on the toll lanes 98 percent of the time. Because the projects are publicly and privately funded, Cintra has a contract with the state Department of Transportation. The speed requirement is built into the contract, said Pablo Ferrando, senior engineer and strategy and revenue manager at Cintra.

Dynamic tolling will start after a six-month grace period using tolls that may change on a schedule—increasing at peak times, for example. The initial tolls are expected to be 15 cents per mile when traffic is slow and 53 cents per mile during peak hours on NTE.

On LBJ Express, the range is expected to be 15 cents per mile to 55 cents per mile.

The rates will be published in advance, Ferrando said.

During that period, engineers will collect information to determine how increasing and decreasing tolls is working to maintain speed. They will use that data to calculate rates for dynamic tolling.

On the North Tarrant Express, motorists also will have to bear in mind that fewer exits are available from the toll lanes. A driver will need to consider that the managed lanes will be faster, but spur-of-the-moment stops for coffee won’t be so easy.

The NTE toll lanes are “really purposed for the downtown business person going to DFW Airport to catch a plane,” said Hinkle. “They have no reason to stop—they just want to get through.”

DFW Connector

Managed toll lanes are being built on four miles of the 8.4-mile DFW Connector, Walzl said.

Details of how tolls will be handled and estimated toll amounts are yet to be worked out, she said. The managed lanes are expected to open in 2014.

The state has a similar 50 mph goal, but there is no contract because the Connector is entirely publicly funded, she said.

In addition to the four toll lanes—the two inside lanes in each direction—the Connector will hold a lot of traffic.

The widest part, between Texan Trail and International Parkway, will be 24 lanes including ramps, frontage roads, main lanes and managed lanes, Walzl said.

The entrance/exit situation is much simpler on the Connector. There is one entrance and one exit near Hwy. 26 on the west side and the same near Hwy. 121 on the east side.

How dynamic tolling works

The system will use sensors embedded in the roadway every half-mile that detect the number of vehicles and their speed. The data is collected every minute for each segment of road, Ferrando said.

An algorithm calculates the toll based on average speed and volume.

More traffic and slower speeds trigger higher tolls.

The goal is to push traffic out of the toll lanes to keep the speed up.

How high can the tolls go? On a similar highway in California, they've gone as high as \$10 for 10 miles, Ferrando said.

"The cap is whatever people are willing to pay," he said. "If people continue flowing into managed lanes, our contract forces us to raise those rates."

Likewise, when the traffic drops and starts moving faster, the tolls go down.

The increases and decreases will occur in increments of 25 percent every five minutes. Drivers of vehicles who get into the toll lanes on LBJ and NTE at a given rate stay at that amount until they enter a different toll lane segment.

Where toll money goes

The \$1.1 billion Connector is entirely publicly funded, so tolls collected will be applied to maintenance of the express lanes, Walzl said.

TxDOT provided \$696 million of the total. The rest came from American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds and Texas Propositions 12 and 14 general obligation bonds.

TxDOT can enter into three five-year agreements for maintenance of major structures with the developer, NorthGate Constructors, according to a TxDOT project tracker.

Both the North Tarrant Express and the LBJ Express were built under public/private partnerships.

The \$2 billion North Tarrant Express funding was \$573 million from TxDOT, a \$650 million federal loan, \$400 million in private activity bonds and \$426 million in private equity.

The private group, made up of Cintra, U.S. Meridiam Infrastructure Finance and the Dallas Police and Fire Pension System, is called NTE Mobility Partners. While TxDOT owns the project, the partnership will operate and maintain it for 52 years.

The tolls collected for that period will simultaneously go to pay down the debt, pay back the investors and cover maintenance and operations of the corridor, said Andy Rittler, corporate affairs director for the LBJ Infrastructure Group.

After the 52 years, the road system reverts to the state, which can continue tolls and use them for maintenance; stop tolling; or re-sign a maintenance agreement, Rittler said.

Hinkle said the roads have to be in like-new condition when NTE Mobility Partners hands them over.

The same parties, under the name LBJ Infrastructure Group, invested in the \$2.6 billion LBJ Express project.

The funding breakdown: \$490 million from TxDOT, a \$850 million federal loan, \$615 million in private activity bonds and \$664 million in private equity.

The agreement is the same as the one on NTE. Yearly maintenance is expected to cost \$1.7 million.

Tolls on all three projects will be collected and managed by the North Texas Tollway Authority.

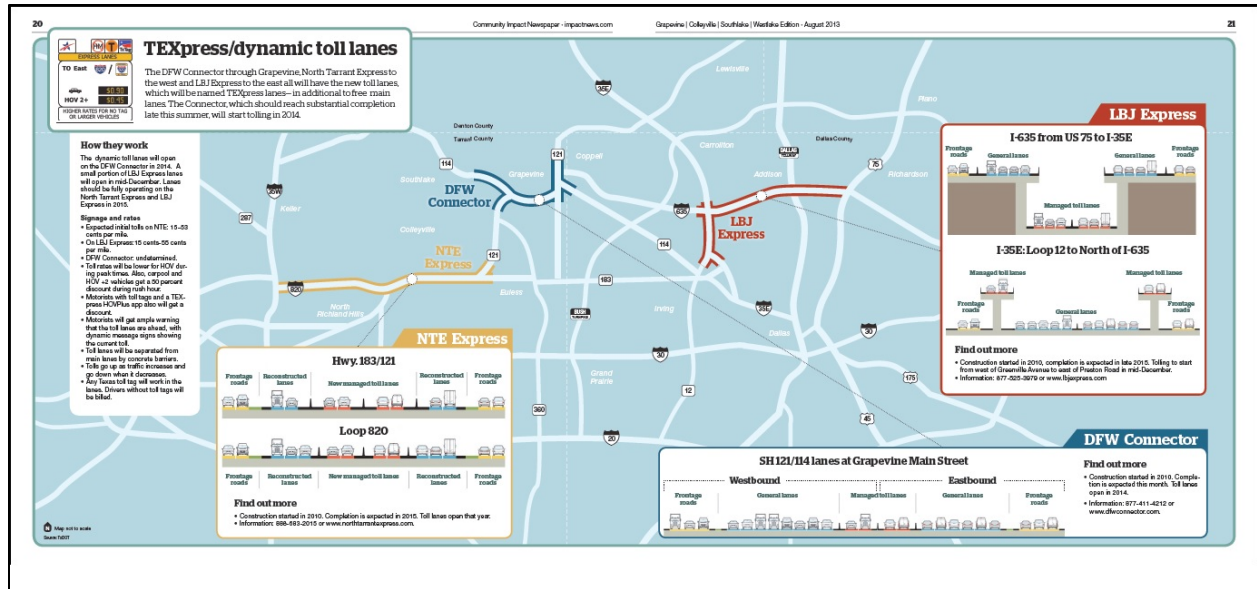
Future toll roads

More toll roads already are under construction on I-30 and I-35 with an aim, Hinkle said, to one day connect Fort Worth to Plano with fast managed lanes.

Toll roads probably are the way of the future, transportation experts said.

As Michael Burbank, program manager for the North Central Texas Council of Governments noted, there is little room for more road widening in North Texas.

"We do have to manage what we have," he said. "Anything we're putting out there in future may be looking at some kind of toll component."



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