

Tarrant cos. brace for construction

N. Tarrant Express highway project will interfere with traffic patterns through 2015



DRIVING TRAFFIC: Traffic flow around North East Mall in Hurst will see disruptions as the bulk of the \$2.5 billion project gets under way next month.

BY CANDACE CARLISLE | STAFF WRITER

Construction on the \$2.5 billion, 13.5-mile North Tarrant Express is scheduled to ramp up following the holidays, and businesses along the corridor are preparing to hunker down during the revamp of Interstate 820 and State Highway 183.

The five-year project will affect traffic flow to a number of restaurants and businesses along the corridor, including North East Mall and Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital Hurst-Euless-Bedford, developers said.

Project developers will begin the bulk of North Tarrant Express construction next month.

By then, businesses and residents will begin to see more traffic concerns in the area, said Belen Marcos, chief executive officer of NTE Mobility Partners LLC in North Richland Hills.

NTE Mobility Partners LLC is a partnership led by Spanish company Cintra U.S., a private-sector developer of transportation infrastructure, and France's Meridiam Infrastructure, a global public-private partnership investor and developer of public facilities. The project is wholly owned by the Texas Department of Transportation.



MARCOS

The firm employs more than 2,000 workers and plans include contracts with more than 100 Dallas-Fort Worth area and Texas companies.

"We are trying to identify the best detours and finalize bridge and lane closures that will minimize the impact," Marcos said. "We all know it will be a little painful, but the response from the business community has been positive."

The S.H. 121-State Highway 183 corridor is at capacity and there's no room for business and population growth along the road, Marcos said. The North Tarrant Express project will double the capacity of the road

in the first segment of the project and add several lanes of traffic to the second segment, she said. "Growth can't come by itself. You always improve the growth of an area through improved infrastructure," Marcos said.

Businesses bracing

Nearly 200,000 vehicles flow daily along S.H. 183 west of the S.H. 121 split, according to the North Central Texas Council of Governments. By 2030, officials are projecting 317,000 vehicles will travel the roadway. The corridor runs through Fort Worth, Haltom City, North Richland Hills, Hurst, Euless and Bedford.

TARRANT: 'It's already congested and past capacity,' owner says

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Although NTE Mobility is working to minimize the project's impact on retail businesses, changes to traffic patterns will significantly slow traffic flow and create congestion until construction is done in 2015, officials said.

Clogged highways could discourage consumers from venturing to businesses along the corridor, officials said.

The City of North Richland Hills, along with roughly 15 business owners, have formed a team to work with NTE Mobility.

Communication on the project and how to keep businesses up and running during the five-year construction phase is imperative, said Craig Hulse, director of economic development for North Richland Hills and self-proclaimed "ringleader" of the business group.



HULSE

"We're bracing for something similar to the DFW Connector project and similar to the Grapevine Funnel — we're preparing for concrete barriers and increased congestion on the roads," Hulse said. "We foresee a perceived concern from the business standpoint for customers accessing the businesses."

The Grapevine Funnel is where Interstate 635, S.H. 114, S.H. 121, and State Highway 97 merge.

Tony Pack, vice president and

dealer principal at Five Star Ford in North Richland Hills, is chairman of the business group.

Pack plans to amp up the dealership's marketing, utilize social media and provide additional services, like door-to-door service, so customers don't have to fight traffic. "This will be a challenge for all, but if we work together and communicate on the corridor, we can make this a workable situation for everyone," Pack said.

The dealership sells about 6,000 new and used vehicles a year and 30,000 customers come through the parts, service and body shop annually.

Five Star Ford, an 18-acre dealership and one of the larger dealerships in the nation, lost roughly 200 parking spaces to the project's right of way. "It's already congested and past capacity," Pack said. "This will be a first-class thoroughfare and will help that congestion."

Limited access

Hospital administrators at Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital H-E-B are concerned the construction will limit access for physicians, emergency personnel and patients, said Alice Landers, vice president of operations.

Texas Health Harris Methodist has 300 beds and about 340 physicians working at the hospital.

"We'll have an issue with fewer patients and our volumes will be down, particularly in outpatient care," Landers said. "If they can

go elsewhere to get something done, they will."

The hospital plans to place temporary signage along routes and distribute communications regarding lane and exit closures, she said.

"This is a good decision for Tarrant County in the long-term," Landers said. "In the end, it will make us a little more accessible and people will get here faster, with less traffic."

Avoiding the holiday rush

Officials with the North Tarrant Express project have already begun working with businesses along the corridor, including North East Mall, to minimize the impact of construction on the holiday shopping season.

North East Mall has about 140 retailers and is one of the largest malls in North Texas with nearly 1.7 million square feet of space.

The majority of the construction near the mall will be done primarily during lulls in the shopping seasons, Hulse said.

"Construction is construction and there will be some impact, but it won't cripple or choke business activity," he said.

A small number of businesses have closed along the corridor, officials said. However, the majority of businesses have become heavily involved with the project to keep consumer traffic flowing. Members of the North Richland Hills business team are working with the developer to work out detour routes that won't negatively



impact the businesses, Hulse said. "There is a perception, especially from customers, not to go to businesses located near construction," he said.

But businesses and developers have begun to show an enhanced

interest in the corridor, Hulse said, adding, "the more cars moving along the corridor, the more visibility and access for future businesses."

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