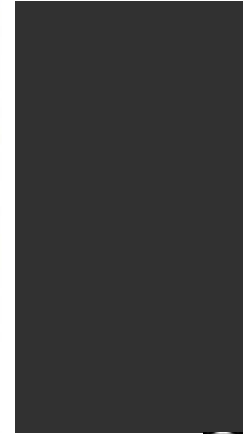
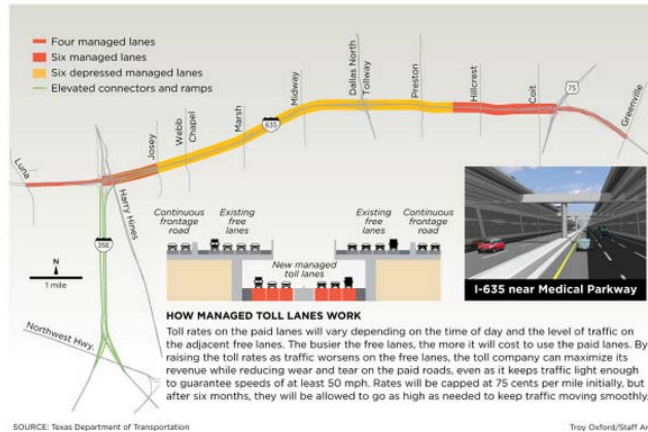
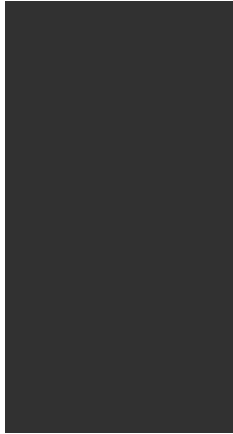


# LBJ headaches to begin for Dallas commuters as 5-year project gets under way



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Drivers already plagued by some of Texas' slowest traffic on LBJ Freeway are about to learn just how bad things can get, as crews begin the total reconstruction of one of the nation's busiest freeways.

The potential for disruption is profound, as thousands of businesses line the busy corridor and 270,000 cars travel the segment between U.S. 75 and Interstate 35E daily, making it the most heavily traveled corridor in North Texas and the third most-congested in Texas.

The \$2.7 billion reconstruction, one of the biggest and most complex construction projects in Dallas history, will not add any free lanes to the highway. But it will rebuild those lanes and improve its network of frontage roads. When complete,

the new highway will run above six new paid lanes that will be dug deep into the ground below the highway.

Preliminary work on the project began months ago, but for most drivers, the real headaches will begin early next month when crews close carpool lanes to make way for the road builders.

Those carpool lanes — one in each direction — are the region's busiest, and carry 44,000 passengers a day. Those travelers will have to decide whether to take another route to work or force their way into the already crowded main lanes.

An open house Thursday will give nearby residents, business owners and motorists a closer look at what the coming five years of construction will mean. The information session is at the Sheraton [North Dallas](#) hotel, 4801 LBJ Freeway, from 1 to 8 p.m.

The rebuilt highway will be Dallas' first to offer a mix of paid and free lanes, joining a similar project in Houston and in [Fort Worth](#) as the state's first so-called managed lane projects. Both the Fort Worth project, known as the North Tarrant Express, and the new LBJ are being built and largely financed by a team of investors led by Spanish toll road firm Cintra.

That team of private investors will control the project for 52 years, maintain all of its lanes and collect tolls on the optional paid lanes that will be several times higher than those charged by the [North Texas Tollway Authority](#).

But for drivers, the new headaches will come long before they must decide whether to pay the new tolls.

LBJ Freeway carries 100,000 more vehicles every day than it was designed to. And no matter who got the job — or whether it involved toll lanes or free lanes or both — the prospect of rebuilding it while trying to keep traffic moving along Dallas' busiest east-west corridor was never going to be painless.

While under construction, the lanes will be redrawn regularly because the firms' contract with the state requires that it keep four main lanes in each direction available for traffic. But which of the five lanes that exist now will be kept open

will change from week to week as construction needs change, said spokesman Andy Rittler of the LBJ Infrastructure Group, the project's builders.

The construction will mean five years of hassles for drivers and business owners alike, though officials with the state and the road builders say they are working hard to minimize those problems.

"We have to really push on the front end with the drivers to educate themselves about the changes," Rittler said. "It's going to take some time, and it's going to be a little messy for three or four months. Hopefully, drivers will then get used to it, because we're going to change lane configurations quite a bit — probably on a weekly basis."

Lots of projects

The reconstruction of LBJ Freeway is one of a handful of multibillion-dollar highway projects under way that have together marked North Texas out as one of the country's busiest areas when it comes to building highways.

But with that explosion in new highways — almost all of which have included tolls — has come significant consternation for commuters.

Near Grapevine, state officials are constructing the DFW Connector, a complex series of improvements aimed at detangling the famously snarled Grapevine Funnel. It's a project, about half the size of the LBJ job, that's been among the top priorities of North Tarrant elected officials for decades, and its kickoff last year was greeted with wide applause.

But so far, the cost of progress has been a pain for drivers and businesses in the area, said one of its longest-tenured advocates, Mayor William D. Tate of Grapevine.

"At times, it's been pretty frustrating to the drivers and to the businesses here," said Tate, noting that some businesses have seen sales drop as a result.

"And the accidents have nearly doubled this year over last year," he said, leading to efforts to improve signage and lower the construction zone speed limit to 50 mph. "They do a lot of the work at night, so you wake up in the morning, and there is a different highway to negotiate on the way to work. That's very confusing at times, so you really have to be on your toes."

Be aware

Rittler said the best advice his company can offer drivers is to stay informed about the changing landscape that will confront them as they drive LBJ over the next five years.

“Know before you go,” he said, echoing a motto he said will help drivers avoid accidents.

The company maintains a website — [www.lbjexpress.com](http://www.lbjexpress.com) — where motorists and business owners can subscribe to text and email alerts that will keep them informed, he said.

That kind of information can help, said Walter Humann.

Humann helped spearhead the public support for the reconstruction of U.S. 75 between Dallas and [Plano](#) in the 1990s, a project that probably came closest to creating the kinds of challenges that confront the LBJ reconstruction.

But Humann said problems were fewer than expected, thanks in part to constant communication among the builders and area businesses and commuters.

The two projects share something else, too, however. In both cases, the years-long construction efforts weren’t enough to end traffic jams for the majority of those who use the roads daily.

In the case of U.S. 75, the new lanes quickly filled up with new traffic, and traffic there routinely slows to a stop during rush hours.

### **Where the money is coming from:**

A team of private companies led by the Spanish toll road firm Cintra will finance and build the new LBJ Freeway, reconstructing existing lanes, improving the frontage roads and adding new paid lanes which will be much more expensive than typical toll roads.

The state of Texas contributed \$490 million, and the U.S. government provided a low-cost loan of \$850 million. In addition, private firms behind the project invested \$664 million in equity, and took advantage of a government-sponsored tax-free bond program to borrow another \$615 million.

### **What’s happening this year:**

By May, the existing HOV lane on 635 will be closed for the duration of the project

Utility relocations along entire corridor

I-35E/Loop 12 interchange

Reconstruction of Joe Ratliff pedestrian bridge

Reconstruction of Rosser, Hillcrest, Preston and Welch bridges