

Long and winding road: Highway projects begin

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North Tarrant County and part of Denton County will see major changes to roadways as projects to move traffic along the Interstate 35 corridor get under way in the coming months.

On the same day that the 35W Coalition celebrated its fifth anniversary, Denton County officials turned dirt on a ceremonial groundbreaking for a \$15 million State Highway 114 Expansion Project to add lanes to a stretch of the highway in front of Texas Motor Speedway.

The 35W Coalition held its annual meeting Dec. 8 at the Dallas/Fort Worth Marriott Hotel and Golf Club at Champions Circle, across State Highway 114 from the Speedway, and Russell Laughlin, president of the coalition and transportation committee chairman, recapped the organization's history and accomplishments while reminding members that even before the coalition was formed, civic and business leaders were advocating for change.

"These are marathons," he said. "They don't happen in three years, they don't happen in five years, they happen in 10 years."

The coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting transportation improvements along the I-35 north corridor, was able to secure government funding because private dollars also were put toward improving transportation along the stretch of highway that is an everyday part of many North Texans' life.

Since its inception, the coalition has spurred construction on Northeast Loop 820, which is currently under construction and will be completed in 2015; advance construction on I-35W, where construction will start in 2011 and will be completed in 2017; and draft and secure passage of I-35W corridor development guidelines, which are under final consideration by the city of Fort Worth in early 2011.

"We do want to be a part of the local economic development," said Robert Hinkle, with NTE Mobility Partners, who gave an update of the North Tarrant Express project.

Construction along the North Tarrant Express, which includes rebuilding existing lanes, improving and expanding frontage lanes and adding managed toll lanes, is already under way, and Hinkle joked that traffic will continue to move as quickly (or as slowly) along the Loop 820/Highway 183/Highway 121 route during construction as it currently does.

"There's going to be a level of discomfort as this project proceeds and comes to fruition over the next five years," he said.

However, once completed, traffic should flow at 50 mph along the corridor, helped in part by managed toll lanes with variable rates based on travel time and demand. In the mean time, updates about closed lanes or construction delays will be posted online, including on Facebook and Twitter accounts, and an information center near the North East Mall. A hotline will provide information about the project as well.

The plan for the project has been tweaked slightly; for example, elevated lanes were eliminated in the interest of saving time, money and materials, Hinkle said. NTE Mobility Partners assumed operations and maintenance of the corridor on May 1, 2010, and the right-of-way process is under way to acquire more than 300 individual parcels of land along the corridor.

Utilities are being relocated, and the rest of 2010 will include lane closures along frontage roads, medians and shoulders and the preparation of staging areas. The first quarter of 2011 will include ongoing con-

struction as activities ramp up.

The SH 114 Expansion Project will connect to ongoing efforts surrounding I-35W as Denton County officials first focus on a nearly three-mile stretch of road that runs west from I-35 to FM 156. The largely two-lane road will be expanded to four to six lanes of frontage roads through the 27-month project slated to be completed by September 2013, according to a release, and the funding came primarily from Denton County's SH 121 toll revenue.

The second two phases of construction for the project will include creating a four-lane divided highway from FM 156 to the Wise County line and the reconstruction of the intersection of FM 156 and SH 114 and the relocation of the railroad tracks.

Bill Conley, membership chair for the 35W Coalition, urged members of the organization, elected officials from North Texas and business leaders to continue bringing up the topic of transportation and pushing for improvements. While the coalition was celebrating its achievements, leaders say they look forward to what has yet to be tackled: securing funding for the I-35W segment 3C, which runs from U.S. 287 to SH 170; making progress on transportation funding streams; reauthorizing CDA authority; making improvements along SH 114 and SH 170; and improving east- and west-running arterials leading to I-35W.

"We've got dirt all over the place that needs to be moved," Conley said. ■

North Tarrant Express Project Impact

2,000

Texans employed by NTE Mobility Partners

100+

Dallas-Fort Worth and Texas companies to be put to work

4 times greater

Value of NTE project after TxDOT funds leveraged with private investment

2015

Year project road capacity will be doubled

\$2.5 billion

New roadway benefit to North Texas

Source: 35W Coalition