

# Star-Telegram

## Texas adds money to speed up I-35W expansion

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New toll lanes could be open on Interstate 35W as soon as 2017 after the Texas Transportation Commission agreed Thursday to spend an extra \$135 million in state bond funds to speed up the project.

The breakthrough in the long-stalled effort to improve I-35W comes a month after Texas Department of Transportation officials and a team of developers known as North Tarrant Express Mobility Partners announced that they were close to a deal to widen the corridor between downtown Fort Worth and Alliance Airport.

It is one of the most pothole-pocked, truck-clogged and gridlocked corridors in Texas.

Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief called the announcement a "big win" but cautioned that a few hurdles remain before construction can begin.

"Although this isn't the last step in the process, TxDOT's commitment for funding is a critical part of getting us moving again on I-35," Moncrief said. "Residents and visitors who fight the daily traffic know what a difficult problem this has been. The gridlock on I-35 is not only a frustrating burden for commuters, it's also a threat to our environment and the economic future of our city."

Under a plan approved Thursday at a meeting in Austin, the I-35W expansion will become part of the adjacent Loop 820 expansion known as North Tarrant Express. To help pay to rebuild I-35W's lanes and add two toll lanes in each direction, the state pledged to infuse the project with an additional \$135 million. The money will come from Proposition 14, under which future gas tax revenue is used to pay debt incurred for road work.

Improvements include a complete redo of the dangerous I-35W/Loop 820 interchange and removal of all left-lane exits, as well as two new I-35W toll lanes in each direction from I-30 in downtown Fort Worth to just north of the I-35W/U.S. 287 split in far north Fort Worth. Existing freeway lanes would also be rebuilt and remain free.

State Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, called the approval justice for North Texas, which got shortchanged by the state this year when voter-approved Proposition 12 bonds were issued for areas along the I-35 corridor in Texas that have far fewer traffic problems.

"I'm pleased to see Proposition 14 bond money being used to solve real congestion problems in the state, and especially in North Texas, which has seen tremendous growth and has been designated a serious nonattainment area for air quality," said Davis, a Senate transportation committee member.

A year ago, the state Transportation Department abandoned its attempt to develop a new toll road parallel to the I-35 corridor known as the Trans-Texas Corridor. That project was widely criticized as a land grab and an intrusion on Texans' property. Since then, about \$1.9 billion in federal, state and local funding has been committed to widening the I-35 corridor and keeping it a nontoll road, mostly between Hillsboro and San Antonio.

But very little of that money was awarded to the Metroplex, the state's most congested metro area.

Thursday's action brings the total value of work under development in the I-35W/Loop 820/Airport Freeway corridor in Tarrant County to \$3.3 billion, including expansion of Northeast Loop 820 in Fort Worth and Haltom City and Texas 121/183 in Bedford, Euless and Hurst.

Most of the money is coming from NTE Mobility Partners, a group of private-sector firms led by Spain-based Cintra that is assuming the financial risk in return for the right to collect tolls on the toll lanes for 52 years. The project includes a total of about \$773 million in public funds.

NTE Mobility Partners has pledged to rebuild Loop 820 and Airport Freeway by 2015, and I-35W by 2017.

Construction on the Loop 820/Airport Freeway portion will begin within a few weeks. Motorists can expect full-fledged construction on Airport Freeway, particularly in Hurst, by early next year.

The I-35W portion must still clear a couple of bureaucratic hurdles, including a federal environmental review. But Thursday's approval of \$135 million removes the biggest obstacle to completing the work.

"Our business partners understand today that patience is key," said Russell Laughlin, senior vice president of Hillwood Properties at Alliance Texas.

Staff writer John Henry contributed to this report.

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