

## Regional Transportation Council seeks private partner for DFW road projects

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Tarrant County already has more privately funded road work than anywhere else in the state, and more may be on the way.

The Regional Transportation Council agreed Thursday to seek the state's permission to find a private partner that would fund and manage five freeway projects in North Texas, each with managed toll lanes in the median.

Among them: Interstate 35W from Interstate 30 near downtown Fort Worth to Texas 170; Texas 183 from the Texas 121 split in Bedford to Texas 161 in Irving; and East Loop 820 from North East Mall to south of Randol Mill Road.

Two Dallas projects are also included: managed lanes on Interstate 35E in Denton County and on Texas 183 from Texas 161 to downtown Dallas.

The Legislature, which has clamped down on the Texas Department of Transportation's ability to partner with private developers, must now approve the shortlist of projects. Otherwise, the department's legal authority to enter into such deals expires Aug. 31.

If lawmakers approve the council's list, the Tarrant County projects would become a second phase of North Tarrant Express, a multibillion-dollar development under way in Northeast Tarrant County.

### Texas 360 expansion

The first phase of North Tarrant Express includes reconstructing lanes and adding managed toll lanes on Loop 820 from I-35W to North East Mall, and Texas 121/183 from the mall to the Texas 121 split.

It's being built by a team of companies known as NTE Mobility Partners that will collect tolls on the managed lanes for 52 years in exchange for providing much of the upfront financing. Existing lanes will remain free.

Despite supporting those projects, Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley cast the lone vote against the council's action. He argued that the list of projects should include the long-delayed expansion of Texas 360 from East Sublett Road to U.S. 287 in Mansfield.

"If a local solution is out there, we shouldn't be trying to stand in its way," he said.

But officials from the North Texas Tollway Authority objected, saying they want to build the Texas 360 project, although they lack the funding to start.

Texas 360 likely couldn't be built in the next two years anyway, others said, because a federally required environmental study isn't complete.

### Public-private partnerships

The tollway authority will consider joining the council and asking the Legislature to approve public-private partnerships for those projects during a meeting next week.

Tarrant County is home to not only the North Tarrant Express but also a \$1 billion DFW Connector project in Grapevine. DFW Connector is also a privately managed project, although it is entirely taxpayer-funded.

In other action Thursday, the council applauded about two dozen officials from Arlington, Fort Worth, the Transportation Department and other agencies for their handling of traffic in bad weather during Super Bowl week.

Although national sports figures and even some local media have been harsh on the region for not clearing roads faster, the region executed its traffic plan "to perfection," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

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