

Star-Telegram

Elevated lanes no longer part of Airport Freeway expansion plan

Posted Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2011

BY GORDON DICKSON

gdickson@star-telegram.com

Plans to build elevated toll lanes on Texas 121/183 in Northeast Tarrant County have been scrapped.

Instead, the managed toll lanes will be built at ground level, according to a revised design from NTE Mobility Partners, which is planning the \$2 billion-plus North Tarrant Express project.

Not only will developers save money -- the elevated lanes would have required tons of additional concrete and other materials -- but area residents will also benefit from less noise and better aesthetics, one official said.

The behind-the-scenes decision has been months in the making.

"Typically, when you talk about elevated lanes, the public doesn't like it," said Lara Kohl, spokeswoman for Bluebonnet Contractors, which is handling the project construction.

Residents who want to learn more about the project and its recent redesign are invited to a Thursday meeting at First United Methodist Church of Bedford.

About the project

North Tarrant Express is a massive project that will rebuild the existing lanes of Northeast Loop 820 in Haltom City and North Richland Hills, as well as Texas 121/183 -- aka Airport Freeway -- in Bedford, Euless and Hurst. New ramps and frontage roads will also be built.

A future phase could expand Interstate 35W from near downtown Fort Worth to the Alliance Airport area.

The project represents a new approach to highway funding in Texas. Instead of relying solely upon motor fuel taxes to foot the bill, the Texas Department of Transportation hired NTE under a design-build agreement, giving the developer greater control and the flexibility to change the design on the fly.

The developer arranges much of the financing for the project and also retains the right to collect tolls on the managed lanes for 52 years. Existing lanes would remain free.

Thursday's meeting is required before the Federal Highway Administration approves the design changes, officials said. Parts of the project are under construction, and the demolition of the Hurstview Drive bridge over Texas 121/183 is scheduled for the coming months.

Squeezing it in

The expanded highway will fit within the existing right of way, NTE spokesman Robert Hinkle said. A recent decision to remove dozens of trees in nearby neighborhoods had nothing to do with the change, he said.

To squeeze all the lanes into the existing footprint, Kohl said, the project will have steep embankment walls and less landscaping between the main lanes and frontage roads.

Numerous studies have found that elevated freeway lanes not only increase a highway's smells and sounds in surrounding neighborhoods, but they can also divide adjacent neighborhoods, creating a cultural, economic and societal barrier.

Perhaps that's not a concern in Northeast Tarrant County, which grew accustomed to noise along Airport Freeway beginning in the 1980s. But, Euless Mayor Lib Saleh said, the less that neighborhoods are affected, the better.

Elevated lanes also are a safety concern during the winter, she noted.

"If you think about what we've been through the last two weeks, with ice and sleet, it sounds like a better idea to not have them

elevated," she said.

Gordon Dickson, 817-390-7796

[Looking for comments?](#)