

# Highway puts businesses on the road to recovery



Dirk Kelcher, owner of Big Shots Sports Cafe, says four years of construction on the North Tarrant Express put a major dent in his business. Star-Telegram/Khampha Bouaphanh

## Completion of 13-mile stretch leads to return of customers, new construction

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The four years of construction and road closures for the \$2.5 billion North Tarrant Express project put a dent in business at Big Shots Sports Cafe in Bedford, but the owners are ready to raise a glass and celebrate now that the work is finished.

"It's been tough; I'm not going to lie," said Dirk Kelcher whose family owns several Big

Shots locations.

"We had to cancel a lot of promotions; we had to cancel live music," Kelcher said. "Our landlord worked with us. But we know there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

Kelcher said he is ready for better times now that the makeover of a 13-mile stretch, from Interstate 35W in Fort Worth to Industrial Boulevard in Euless, is finished.

Hurst and Bedford, which

endured construction and traffic headaches, are ready to welcome people back to the restaurants and other businesses that were in the path of the construction.

In Hurst, Steve Bowden, executive director of economic development said the city is marketing the intersection of Precinct Line Road and Airport Freeway as the "50-yard line" to welcome businesses and customers back. Businesses on or near the intersection, which has the highest traffic count along the 13-mile NTE corridor, include Abue-

lo's, Starbucks, Outback Steakhouse and In-N-Out burger.

And other businesses are coming, such as the Pollo Tropical restaurant.

"Overall, we were very pleased with how the North Tarrant Express was able to keep so many lanes and ramps open during the very significant construction," Bowden said.

Spokeswoman Ashleigh Johnson said Hurst will also launch a Shop the Mall campaign to welcome shoppers

## Highway

Continued from 1B

back to North East Mall, which sits on the east side of the NTE interchange.

### 'New shiny roads'

Bedford is also using radio and social media to gear up for the return of patrons to restaurants and shops, said spokeswoman Natalie Foster, and welcoming some big changes: The Movie Tavern is expanding into a former grocery store and the \$6 million Texas Health HEB Cancer Center will open this fall.

The Mac Churchill Auto Mall held its grand opening in August in the former site of the Park Plaza Mercedes-Benz dealership on the north side of NTE.

And On the Border also stayed in Bedford, demolishing its building and then rebuilding its restaurant nearby.

North Richland Hills, which sits along the NTE to the west, lost stores and restaurants like Staples and Hobby Lobby, but economic development director Craig

Hulse said the city will soon have a WinCo Foods, Taco Cabana and a Chipotle Mexican Grill. The Huggins Honda dealership is also going through a makeover and building a "state-of-the-art" show room, Hulse said.

"Typically businesses want to locate in an area where there are brand new shiny roads that will not be under construction anytime soon," he said.

Unlike the Hurst-Euless-Bedford segment of the NTE, Haltom City has hundreds of acres of undeveloped land, said city manager Tom Muir.

Before construction began on the NTE, developers didn't have easy access to the vacant land, but now that there are frontage roads with more entrances and exits, developers have far better access to the properties, he said.

Residents want to see more sit-down restaurants, and Muir said retail is also a possibility.

"Our town is different because it really is a blank pallet," he said.

### 'Cut business in half'

Meanwhile, Kelcher said he lost the happy hour

crowd at Big Shots because people did not want to drive through construction zones, but Big Shots stayed open while nearby businesses such as Razoo's Cajun Cafe and the Mongolian Grill closed.

Other businesses near Big Shots, such as Adam Smith's Harley Davidson dealership, came through unscathed.

Terry Purdomn ambassador of fun (yes, that's his title) at the Harley shop, said the dealership grew to be one of the largest in Texas despite the construction.

It's all about customer loyalty, he said.

"We haven't felt the effect, but it has definitely hurt other businesses in the area," Purdomn said.

At J&G's Jewelers, which has been in business for 20 years, Glenn Lewis said business was slow, but he is already noticing that more customers are coming in to the store.

"The construction cut business in half, but I think things will definitely get better," he said.

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