

FORT WORTH JANUARY 21, 2016 1:28 PM

Loop 820 exit to I-35W goes from left to right Sunday in Fort Worth

HIGHLIGHTS

Traffic switch considered a major milestone for project

Long-term, officials say right-turn exit will be safer

Motorists' confusion in short term could cause accidents



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BY GORDON DICKSON
gdickson@star-telegram.com

FORT WORTH — An unpopular relic of last century's highway design — the left-lane freeway exit — is about to change in north Fort Worth.

Beginning by 10 a.m. Sunday, the left exit from westbound Loop 820 to southbound Interstate 35W will be replaced by a new exit on the right side of 820.

The new ramp will be open after a weekend of construction and lane closures in the area, said Heather DeLapp, spokeswoman for Ferrovial Agroman US Corp., one of the lead companies in the North Tarrant Express I-35W project.

The new exit is expected to be much safer long-term, but officials are concerned drivers on westbound Loop 820 may be caught off-guard and try to swerve across three lanes to take the exit. After all, some drivers have been taking the left-lane exit since the late 1960s or early '70s.

10 a.m.

Sunday is when the new Loop 820 exit to I-35W is expected to open.

The result could be a high-speed crash.

"We do know based on previous experience that drivers are creatures of habit," DeLapp said. "We'll do everything we can as far as putting up signage to try to direct people to the right place."

Portable message boards will be installed along westbound Loop 820 from I-35W to Haltom City and North Richland Hills, several miles ahead of the new ramp, to give motorists enough time to switch lanes safely.

Overhead signs along Loop 820 may also point motorists toward the new ramp, she said.

Relic of the 1960s

One of the strongest examples of how transportation engineering and design have improved over the years is the fact that left-lane exits are relatively rare now on limited-access highways. Generally speaking, in countries where motorists drive on the right side of the road, it's far safer to place exits on the right, safety experts have argued for years.

It's not just exiting westbound Loop 820 that over the years has caused motorists to grip their steering wheels with white-knuckle ferocity. Even worse: merging with southbound I-35W traffic on the left side of the road at the end of the ramp — essentially forcing or begging your way into bumper-to-bumper traffic in the I-35W fast lane.

THE \$1.6 BILLION NORTH TARRANT EXPRESS 35W PROJECT INVOLVES A MAKEOVER OF THE FREEWAY CORRIDOR FROM DOWNTOWN FORT WORTH TO THE U.S. 287 "DECATUR CUTOFF."

As bad as the Loop 820/35W left-lane exits have been in recent years, perhaps they might have been a lot more dangerous if not for the work of a retired Texas Department of Transportation planning director. Burton Clifton, who died in December at age 89 after a long illness, spent a fair amount of time trying to retrofit the left-lane exits without much in the way of construction funds.

In a 2003 interview with the *Star-Telegram* upon his retirement from the state agency, Clifton said the 820/35W exits were built in the late 1960s or early '70s, and he was alarmed at how there were essentially no acceleration lanes. Clifton, using limited funds and whatever state right-of-way was available, managed to design the 800-foot acceleration lanes that are there today.

The acceleration lanes weren't worthy of modern road design standards, he acknowledged, but they were better than nothing.

"We've had an awful lot of that business of patching things together," Clifton said in 2003.

Weekend alert

For motorists planning to travel through the 820/35W intersection during the weekend, prepare to cope with lane closures, officials said.

From 9 p.m. Friday through 10 a.m. Saturday, areas where lane closures could occur include:

- alternating lanes of westbound Loop 820 from Beach Street to I-35W;
- right westbound lane of Loop 820 TEXpress lanes from Beach Street to I-35W;
- off-ramp from westbound Loop 820 to Riverside Drive.

Between 9 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. Sunday, expected closures include:

- westbound Loop 820 off-ramp to Riverside Drive;
- alternating lanes of westbound Loop 820 from Beach Street to I-35W;
- direct connector from westbound Loop 820 to southbound I-35W; and the left lane of southbound I-35W at the 820/35W interchange.

Motorists should expect brief delays during those times and seek alternate routes.

Complete makeover

The \$1.6 billion North Tarrant Express 35W project, which involves a makeover of the freeway corridor from downtown Fort Worth to the U.S. 287 "Decatur cutoff" over the next two years-plus, will eventually lead to the closure of all left-lane exits at the 820/I-35W interchange, DeLapp said.

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Heather DeLapp, spokeswoman for Ferrovial Agroman US Corp

The work from downtown to Loop 820 is being done by a group of companies known as NTE Mobility Partners — including Ferrovial Agroman US Corp. and Cintra US — at a cost of \$1.4 billion. The portion from Loop 820 to the U.S. 287 is being done by the Texas Department of Transportation at a cost of \$200 million.

The often crowded left-lane exit from eastbound Loop 820 to northbound I-35W will be replaced in the coming months, as work north of Loop 820 continues, she said. Also, left-lane exits from northbound I-35W to westbound Loop 820 and from southbound I-35W to eastbound Loop 820 will be replaced, she said.

The North Tarrant Express 35W project includes reconstruction of main lanes, improvements to many ramps and frontage roads and the addition of two TEXpress lanes — which are managed toll lanes — in each direction.

Gordon Dickson: 817-390-7796, @gdickson

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