

# Star-Telegram

## New expressway spells relief for Northeast Tarrant

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03/03/2015 6:00 AM | Updated: 03/03/2015 12:00 PM



Traffic moves smoothly now on the recently completed North Tarrant Express. MAX FAULKNER / STAR-TELEGRAM

After decades of traffic congestion followed by four years of massive highway work, Northeast Tarrant County residents are finally enjoying the bounty of wide-open lanes.

The \$2.5 billion North Tarrant Express project, which was completed in October, ended decades of gridlock on Texas 121/183 and Loop 820. And perhaps nowhere was the proverbial commuting pain felt than in the Bedford, Euless and Hurst areas.

Now, not only are area residents getting around much better, but businesses are rebounding along the highway frontage roads.

"It is almost like a new town all along the 121/183 corridor," said Bobby Brown, who lives in Bedford and logs a lot of miles in North Texas in his job as a Franconia beer brand manager.

"There were so many places that had to be torn down, but have been replaced with new more

modern versions of themselves. There is a new energy with a lot of the places that had to rebuild like Mexican Inn.”

Texas 121/183, also called Airport Freeway, is a main pathway for motorists traveling between downtown Fort Worth and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. But the road was over-capacity from the 1980s until the North Tarrant Express project began in 2010.

Because of a chronic shortage of traditional highway funds, the Texas Department of Transportation entered into an unusual contract with a private developer known as NTE Mobility Partners, which is headed by the U.S. arm of Spanish firm Cintra, to build North Tarrant Express.

NTE Mobility Partners agreed to rebuild the entire, 13-mile corridor, putting in modernized frontage roads and ramps. Existing main lanes were rebuilt, and two toll express lanes were added in each direction. The main lanes are toll-free.

In return for paying for much of the project with private investment funds and bringing other revenue sources to the table, NTE Mobility Partners is entitled to receive money generated by the toll express lanes — also known as TEXpress lanes — for 52 years, according to the consortium’s contract with the state.

## Dual function

The road now performs the dual function of helping commuters pass through the Northeast Tarrant County area, while also helping people who live in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford area navigate their neighborhoods.

Roughly 184,000 vehicles per day use the Texas 121/183 corridor, according to a transportation department count conducted near Central Drive.

During construction, the volume of traffic in the area dropped by about 25 percent as drivers detoured to shortcuts on other area roads, including Mid-Cities Boulevard and Texas 10, said Robert Hinkle, NTE Mobility Partners spokesman.

But traffic is steadily returning, he said, and the use of the TEXpress lanes is higher than anticipated.

During the first two months the TEXpress lanes were open, about 600,000 unique visitors drove on them. That’s roughly an average of 10,000 vehicles per day.

Those drivers are willing to pay up to \$3.90 to use the special express lanes. The exact amount of the toll varies by time of day.

## Businesses rebounding

For those who live in the H-E-B area, a bigger change is improved main lanes and frontage roads, which provide better access to schools, neighborhoods and roadside businesses.

In Hurst, for example, some businesses closed during road construction. However, the city has netted an increase of nine businesses along the Precinct Line Corridor, said Steve Bowden, economic development executive director.

"The greatest majority of businesses along the newly expanded highway are restaurants," Bowden said. "Most all are enjoying substantial and steady increases in traffic and sales during the last four months."

Bowden added that while many businesses relied upon the loyalty of residents who live in H-E-B, "now they are experiencing greater traffic from commuters coming from great distances and coming off the highway."

Hurst is marketing the Precinct Line Road corridor as the "50-yard line" of activity in the area, and encouraging patrons to frequent businesses in the area such as Abuelo's, In-N-Out Burger and Outback Steakhouse.

North East Mall is also the focus of a Shop the Mall campaign, which encourages area residents to return to the area that has been Hurst's retail anchor for decades, spokeswoman Ashleigh Johnson said.

In Bedford, business activities include a new Texas Health HEB Cancer Center and expansion of the Movie Tavern into a former grocery store. City officials are promoting those businesses through a variety of methods, including social media, spokeswoman Natalie Foster said.

*THIS REPORT INCLUDES MATERIAL FROM THE STAR-TELEGRAM ARCHIVES.*

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