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Northeast Tarrant Expressway opens with free lanes and toll lanes



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Northeast Tarrant County drivers hitting the open road Saturday will see the freeway of the future: part public and part private.

The \$2.5 billion Northeast Tarrant Expressway opens this weekend with a mix of free lanes and managed toll lanes. It models the type of public-private partnership that local transportation officials are championing as a way to replace state and federal funding that's failed to keep pace.

Brian Barth, the Fort Worth district engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation, said the improvements in Northeast Tarrant County have been a regional and state priority since 1990. But the money just wasn't there.

"This was years — possibly decades — before the funds could have been identified and the project built using the traditional methods," Barth said about the project, which includes Loop 820 and State Highways 183 and 121.

The work was partially funded with \$573 million in state transportation dollars.

Gas taxes, which fund highway construction, have not been raised in more than 20 years. Fuel-efficient cars have also cut into that revenue.

The rest of the funding for the Northeast Tarrant project came from private bonds, a federal loan and investments from an international consortium that includes the Dallas Police and Fire Pension System.

Proceeds from the toll lanes during the next half-century will pay off the debt. If returns are large enough, some money could go back to the state.

The 13.3-mile project runs from Euless to Haltom City and was completed about nine months ahead of schedule.

Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes said the toll lanes are expected to reduce rush hour commutes from an hour to 20 minutes in that stretch of highway.

"It's going to open up this whole corridor to a boost in economic development," Fickes said.

The project is expected to double the area's freeway capacity, which hasn't kept up with population growth.

Fickes said the population of his commissioner's district, which encompasses the county's northeast quadrant, has more than doubled since 1990.

The convenience, particularly during rush hour, will cost drivers who want to be guaranteed 50-mph minimum speed. Driving the two segments of the managed lanes will initially cost as little as 90 cents on nights and early mornings on the weekends. The morning weekday rush hour toll will debut Monday at \$3.90 for the two segments.

Those are discounted rates and will eventually increase.

Tolls will increase for solo drivers if speeds on the toll lanes dip below 50 mph.

Vehicles with two or more people will receive an initial 50 percent discount on the tolls, but that will be phased out by June 1, 2016. Car pools with three or more people will receive the discount as long as they register via the driveontexpress.com website.

This tolling plan is similar to the one on LBJ Freeway expansion, which is partially open.

Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, described the partnership as the “best of what the public sector can do and the best of what the private sector can do.”

Morris said the private sector takes a bulk of the risk while taxpayers don't have to pay more if they avoid the toll lanes.

Road expansion and reconstruction is particularly important, given limited mass transit options in Tarrant County.

While Dallas Area Rapid Transit has 13 member cities, the membership of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority includes only Fort Worth, Richland Hills and Blue Mound. That agency is scheduled to open a commuter rail line in 2018 and is co-owner of the Trinity Railway Express.

Other major projects are planned or underway for Interstate 35W in Fort Worth, and Highway 183, or Airport Freeway, from Euless to the east. Another reconstruction of highway interchanges around Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport was recently completed.

The use of tolls to make up for state shortfalls hasn't always been embraced. Tolloed car pool lanes on Central Expressway were considered but dropped after the Texas Transportation Commission indicated it opposed the plan. Some Collin County officials also opposed it.

Morris said innovative financing is badly needed to handle the inevitable growth. The Dallas-Fort Worth area has about 6.7 million people and is projected to grow by more than half by 2040, he said.

“Our office has to stand up for when we are 10.5 million people,” Morris said.

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