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Toll lanes: What Fort Worth area motorists can expect

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Traffic moves west along the frontage road of west bound Loop 820 near North Beach Street in Fort Worth.

RON JENKINS / STAR-TELEGRAM

Nearly a year has passed since the Chisholm Trail Parkway toll road opened to traffic between downtown Fort Worth and Cleburne.

In another part of the region, the North Tarrant Express project, which includes reconstruction of free lanes and the addition of toll lanes on Loop 820 and Texas 121/183 in Northeast Tarrant County, has now been open for business more than six months.

To say Fort Worth-area motorists are becoming accustomed to paying tolls wherever they go is an understatement.

And there's more. In 2018, a rebuilt Interstate 35W is expected to open between downtown Fort Worth and AllianceTexas. That's another road that will feature a combination of toll and toll-free lanes.

So, like them or not, toll lanes appear to be here to stay.

With that in mind, here are some things to expect in the coming months and years on the western side of the Metroplex:

Higher toll rates

The North Tarrant Express toll lanes have been open six months, and the private-sector operator is now free to charge whatever rates the market will bear — up to 75 cents per mile. Most of the time, the rates will be in the 25-cent to 45-cent-per-mile range, though.

During the first six months after the road opened Oct. 3, the private consortium that controls the road, NTE Mobility Partners, followed a rigid chart showing the toll rates hour by hour. But the introductory period is over.

“The toll rates are traffic-driven, meaning that as traffic builds across all lanes the rates increase gradually,” said Robert Hinkle, spokesman for NTE Mobility Partners.

He said one goal is to raise toll prices to dissuade motorists from using the toll lanes. With fewer cars on the toll lanes, it’s easier to ensure the traffic stays at a minimum of 50 mph on the toll lanes, which is the goal.

For example, just after 9 a.m. on a recent weekday morning, the advertised price for a trip on the Loop 820 toll lanes from I-35W to the Texas 121/183 merge was \$3.50. That trip represents roughly half the 13-mile North Tarrant Express corridor. But during off-peak times — a Sunday morning, for example — that same trip could be less than \$1.

NTE Mobility Partners, headed by the U.S. arm of Spanish firm Cintra, will control the North Tarrant Express lanes and receive the toll revenues through March 2061, according to its contract with the state.

Bedford speed zone

Bedford police are keeping an eye out for speeders on the North Tarrant Express toll lanes, particularly between Industrial Boulevard and Central Drive. Officers are there regularly with laser-equipped speed detectors to spot and pull over lead-footed drivers.

Toll lanes have a speed limit of 70 mph, whereas non-toll lanes are 60 mph.

"Officers do work both the main lanes and the toll lanes. They have people going way in excess of 70 mph," said Bedford police Lt. David Smith.

He said the traffic patrols are not a special speeding initiative.

Better downtown access

When the I-35W makeover is completed in 2018, motorists in the toll lanes will have their own lanes to get to and from downtown.

"It's a lane that splits off I-35W and comes between Weatherford and Belknap streets," said Andy Taft, president of Downtown Fort Worth Inc., who added that he was recently briefed by project managers.

Taft said he was told it will be a reversible ramp. "In the morning, the lane is going be one-way into downtown, and at night the gates will change and it will be one-way out of downtown," he said.

Officials working on the I-35W expansion haven't made a final decision about whether to make the ramp reversible, or two-directional, Hinkle said.

Once the \$1.4 billion revamp of I-35W is complete, existing entries to downtown will remain much the same as they are today for non-toll traffic.

If the ramp to downtown is reversible, on weekday mornings it will dump vehicles heading westbound into downtown onto Belknap Street. Then, in the afternoons that ramp will be open to eastbound traffic heading out of town from Weatherford Street.

The ramp is scheduled to be built just east of the Sonic restaurant at 100 N. Nichols, between Belknap and Weatherford streets, and will extend over the freight railroad tracks, officials said.

More company on the toll lanes

Expect more people to use toll lanes in the western Metroplex in the years to come. For decades, the trend has been steady growth in the number of toll-paying customers for the North Texas Tollway Authority, which built Chisholm Trail Parkway and most other toll roads in the Dallas area. The Texas Department of Transportation, which oversee contracts for the toll lanes on otherwise toll-free highways such as Loop 820, also is seeing numbers rise.

About one in four TollTags is registered to a vehicle in Tarrant or Johnson counties, said Michael Rey, North Texas Tollway Authority spokesman.

Regionwide, TollTags are installed on 3,167,311 vehicles — mostly in Collin, Dallas and Denton counties, Rey said. In Tarrant County, there are more than 678,000 TollTags, and in Johnson County, about 40,000.

Use of toll lanes — also sometimes labeled express lanes, or TEXpress lanes — also is on the rise on the North Tarrant Express project. The toll lanes on Loop 820 and Texas 121/183 are averaging 350,000 unique visitors per month, or roughly 12,000 vehicles per day.

That's an increase from the first two months, when an average of 300,000 unique visitors per month used the toll lanes, Hinkle said.

Lots of room in Grapevine

Another road with toll lanes is the DFW Connector, the Texas 114/121 corridor in Grapevine that was rebuilt in 2013.

Some motorists have said it seems that few vehicles are on the toll lanes, which are managed by the Texas Department of Transportation.

But an average of 5,224 vehicles per day are using them, agency spokesman Tony Hartzel said.

The transportation department isn't using the DFW Connector toll lanes to generate revenue to pay off debt. Instead, those toll lanes are expected to become more popular over the next several years as more motorists begin using the corridor — already one of the busiest in the Metroplex — for their commute.

The typical toll rate for for the DFW Connector, which has only two entry/exit points — one in Southlake, the other in Irving — is 70 cents for TollTag users and \$1.33 for those who pay by mail.

Pricing on the toll lanes can go up if the DFW Connector main lanes become congested, but it doesn't happen much. During the winter, the transportation department was criticized when the automated system raised prices to \$7 per car during a snow and ice storm.

Hartzel said officials fixed the problem, and now have a policy that during bad weather events a fixed price is placed on the toll lanes, to avoid overcharging the public.