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Transportation

2014 in transportation: Toll projects garnered furor while rail projects drew excitement

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North Texas this year moved closer to becoming home to the nation’s largest network of managed toll lanes, as the second phase of LBJ Freeway’s massive renovation opened.

The region’s proliferation of toll lanes and roads expanded into Tarrant County with the opening of three projects — the DFW Connector, the North Tarrant Express and the Chisholm Trail Parkway. And in Dallas, the long-planned Trinity Parkway toll road once again emerged as one of the city’s most contentious topics.

Construction, meanwhile, continues on several projects that promise to alleviate congestion and better connect the region. A private company’s plans for a bullet train between Dallas and Houston garnered praise in 2014. And Dallas Area Rapid Transit completed the Orange Line to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

“It’s certainly not the finale, but it’s a huge completion of a major task,” DART president and executive director Gary Thomas said.

But 2014 was also the year that drivers' opposition to more toll roads forced regional officials to back away from some projects and prompted state lawmakers' attempts to limit funding for them.

"People literally have toll fatigue," said State Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano. "They are surrounded by toll roads in our area."

North Central Texas Council of Governments officials backed away from three attempts that sought to use tolls to partially or fully fund projects.

The agency withdrew its support of a controversial rural toll road between Garland and Greenville after several cities in the road's path formally opposed the project amid residents' intense backlash. NCTCOG officials also scrapped plans to turn carpool lanes on Central Expressway north of LBJ Freeway into managed toll lanes after several Collin County politicians balked at the idea.

NCTCOG also dropped from its 2015 legislative agenda a plan that would have sought approval for the Texas Department of Transportation to help finance the controversial Trinity Parkway toll project, which is facing a massive shortfall.

Toll roads left out

Shortfalls on transportation projects remain a statewide issue. TxDOT estimates that it faces an annual shortfall of at least \$3.6 billion needed to keep pace with infrastructure demand. Voters in November overwhelmingly agreed to send excess oil and gas production taxes to the agency, which resulted in an almost immediate \$1.6 billion deposit to the state highway fund.

But voters' approval of Proposition 1 was predicated on the caveat that none of TxDOT's new funds could be spent on roads that have a toll component. Similar caveats appear in bills that seek to continue shoring up TxDOT's shortfalls in the Legislature's 2015 session.

Leach is among a handful of state lawmakers who have filed such bills. He wants to send some existing tax revenues that currently go to the general fund to TxDOT instead. Those sources include some or all of the sales taxes on car purchases, vehicle parts and tires. But his bills also include the caveat that those revenues aren't to be used on toll projects.

"People generally feel like they are already paying for roads via their gas tax dollars, and they're right," he said.

That's not to say toll projects won't continue to appear. State Highways 114 and 183, LBJ Freeway and Interstate 35E are all undergoing expansions or renovations that include toll lanes.

On the rails

Texas Central Railway this year unveiled potential routes and stations for a privately funded high-speed rail line connecting Dallas and Houston. The project promises to move people between the two cities in 90 minutes and could be the first high-speed train in the United States. The company also tapped former Dallas mayor and U.S. trade representative Ron Kirk as a senior adviser.

The project was cheered by officials and residents in the state's two largest urban areas. But residents in small towns along the potential paths expressed frustration about the project, which requires rural land but doesn't feature many stops.

Travis Kelly, TCR's vice president for government relations, said much of the aggravation stems from uncertainties about where exactly the tracks will go. He said the company has so far only discussed the concept. Exact routes are undetermined and pieces of land needed for the project are not yet identified. Those details, he said, are being worked out as the project moves forward.

"We're just not at the point where we can have those conversations," he said.

That high-profile project prompted DART officials to fast-track an ambitious transit plan for downtown Dallas. The agency wants to tie its light-rail system in to a potential downtown Dallas station on TCR's line. DART plans to add a second light-rail line downtown and link Oak Cliff, downtown and Uptown with expanded streetcar service.

Thomas said that while the airport-to-downtown train service was a major coup, the agency continues to push forward with plans for expansion and additional service.

"I don't know that the finale will ever come during my lifetime," he said. "I hope not. There's always going to be that next big opportunity, that next big project."

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