



Panel signs off on I-35E expansion

By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

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An Interstate 35E expansion project was signed and sealed by area transportation officials Monday. Now it just has to be delivered.

Members of the Senate Bill 1420 Committee — a requirement of the bill that authorizes the use of public-private partnerships to fund the expansion of a 28-mile stretch of I-35E between Denton and Dallas — unanimously voted Monday afternoon for the final draft of the expansion project for the highway.

On tap now are sending updated resolution documents to the Regional Transportation Council to consider as part of the process as well as Texas Department of Transportation officials working to decide which construction firm will handle the heavy lifting for the project.

“Denton County is excited about the vote of the S.B. 1420 Committee today. After years of hard work, Denton County got exactly what we wanted ... an expanded 35E with additional free lanes, paid for with public funds,” Denton County Commissioner Andy Eads said. “This first phase should be over \$1.5 billion dollars by leveraging our county funds with additional city, state and federal funds.

“This is the type of public project we advocated for over a year ago and continued to reiterate over the past several months.”

According to TxDOT officials, the first phase of the project will add one general-purpose lane in each direction from Interstate 635 to U.S. Highway 380, rebuild high-occupancy lanes into two reversible managed toll lanes between I-635 and Loop 288, build new southbound frontage roads, general-purpose lanes and managed lanes across Lewisville Lake, and move northbound traffic to the existing bridge.

The phase will also improve critical interchanges at I-635, Belt Line Road, Dickerson Parkway, Sam Rayburn Tollway and FM407, among others.

Eads said he expected construction on the first phase to begin about a year from now.

All committee members were in attendance Monday except for Carrollton Mayor Mathew Marchant, who had a family emergency.

As expected, the committee approved reinstating language in the recent RTC resolution that will keep revenue raised in the corridor in the corridor until the project is complete.

^f TxDOT officials then laid out the procurement schedule for the project. This month, officials received
^b qualifications from construction firms interested in working on the project. By April, officials will have made a short list of firms they want to consider for the work.

Officials will draft a request for proposals in May and have a final one ready in July. The final proposals will be due back to TxDOT in October, with the chosen firm awarded the project in November.

TxDOT received five responses from firms to complete the I-35E project using a design build method.

In a design build project, a project's design is tailored to a given budget, and firms can compete to see which can do the best work under design and budget considerations.

Some of the firms teamed up to submit qualifications for the project.

Despite the slight increase in cost for the project to meet the concerns of the city of Denton, Eads said, he thinks it won't affect the financial ability to complete the project.

"I think the competitive tension of the bidding process will be able to allow us to expand the project to include that," he said.

In recent weeks, the committee learned TxDOT had gathered about \$2 billion from various sources and that a little more than \$300 million is expected to be applied to the expansion project.

Committee members spent time talking about language used in the expansion proposal for the second of two phases of the project.

Transportation consultant John Polster said he did not want the committee to use language in the proposal that locked the project's second phase into a public delivery method. Since no one knows what finances are going to look like five years in the future, he said, it would be best to leave the project open and available to whatever the best delivery option is at that time.

Commissioner Hugh Coleman, who has been an advocate of including general-purpose free lanes in any expansion proposal, said he is glad the 1420 Committee recommended the additional free lanes for each managed lane.

"I think it's important that we were not required to use a concessioner for this expansion," he said. "We need to stay diligent at this point to make sure everything represented in these past meetings is completed and we get the best value for our dollar."

Eads touted the committee's vote on the delivery, a public method.

"It's not a foreign company. It's not the private sector. The public is going to do it. A lot of people were fearful of foreign investors," Eads said. "The motion to approve the proposal was made by Denton County's representative. We have this new money from the state and feds, and it makes it more doable, and we're ready to move ahead with our big project."

BJ LEWIS can be reached at 940-566-6875. His e-mail address is blewis@dentonrc.com .

