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Improvements in the works for both sides of I-35 in DFW

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Interstates 35W and 35E have been figuratively joined at the hip since they were designated highways in 1959.

Now officials on both sides of Dallas-Fort Worth are working feverishly to end years of neglect on the sibling interstates and to rebuild and expand them to meet modern traffic needs.

On the west side of the Metroplex, Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price praised business and local political leaders Wednesday for pressuring state and federal officials to expand I-35W from downtown to the Alliance area. Price blamed congestion on the highway for creating a chasm between residents of fast-growing far north Fort Worth and those in the rest of the city.

"Those who live in north Fort Worth have learned they might not go to the zoo, might not go to the Cultural District. It's just too much trouble on I-35," she told members of the 35W Coalition, a group formed in 2005 to aggressively pursue funding for the corridor. "That's not acceptable."

On the east side, officials are expected to unveil a plan Friday to finance the expansion of I-35E from I-635 in Dallas to U.S. 380 in Denton.

More than \$1 billion in public funds have been identified for the I-35E work, which would add free and toll lanes.

New funds

Plans for I-35W include rebuilding lanes from I-30 to Northeast Loop 820 and adding two managed toll lanes in each direction by 2017.

The work would become a new phase of the North Tarrant Express, a \$2.5 billion project under way on nearby Northeast Loop 820 and Texas 121/183.

To get the work done, the state needs to come up with an estimated \$537 million.

The Texas Department of Transportation has applied for federal grants and loans, but with Congress unable to agree on a long-term transportation funding plan, those funds are unlikely to cover the entire cost.

State transportation officials announced last month that they will likely have \$2 billion more than previously budgeted for road work statewide over the next two to four years. Some of that money could be used on I-35W if the application for a federal transportation infrastructure loan -- or TIFIA -- falls through.

"If in the event we are not successful in picking up \$500 million and change on a TIFIA loan, I think we have a pretty good backup plan," Texas Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows told the 35W Coalition. "If there's any good news about a recession, it is that construction costs have fallen dramatically and that is beginning to yield revenue we didn't anticipate having."

Closing the gap

For I-35E, Denton County is contributing \$600 million from its share of regional toll revenue from the Sam Rayburn Tollway. But a funding gap of up to \$900 million remains.

At Friday's briefing, officials are expected to unveil the results of their efforts to reduce the project's cost and bring in new revenue sources, which could include some of the statewide windfall.

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