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Plan could give region \$500M boost

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A plan that could mean more public funding for transportation projects was revealed Friday by Michael Morris, North Texas Council of Governments transportation director.

Morris told the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition that the Texas Department of Transportation has opened a new dialogue with the Texas Legislature after the passage of a bill during the 82nd Legislative Session that could pave the way for additional funding of transportation projects.

The agency hopes, Morris said, to demonstrate good faith to the legislature by spending revenues already allocated to it by the state between now and the next session. It also hopes to effectively use the tools given to it by the Legislature to address transportation projects, promote local regional control and emphasize the strength of the relationships it has with metropolitan planning organizations to the Legislature.

"The thought is from TxDOT, if we can accomplish these four things and they can demonstrate to the Legislature there's a new TxDOT that understands the policy direction that they receive from the Legislature, and they mature that relationship and enhance that relationship, there are new revenue opportunities available from the legislature to move forward," he said.

The existing, one-time revenues TxDOT hopes to utilize this year include a projected \$700 million in new federal funds, \$600 million in bond-refinancing savings and another \$600 million in savings from projects that have come in under bid.

The Dallas-Fort Worth area's share of the funding amounts to \$500 million, \$314 million of which will fund the Denton County phase of the I-35E expansions, which are planned to widen the road to eight regular lanes and four additional toll-managed lanes from the President George Bush Tollway to U.S. Highway 380.

The agency also hopes to leverage the \$500 million into \$2.5 billion by taking advantage of public-private partnerships, transportation reinvestment zones and design build initiatives, Morris said.

All-new sources of revenue the Legislature could consider next year include a \$50 increase to the vehicle registration fee, which could mean an additional \$7.5 billion for the DFW region alone, and a 0.5 percent increase in the motor vehicle sales tax, which could net \$1.9 billion.

"I'm not saying these are the legislative proposals yet, even though we're hearing things along this line," Morris said.

Other existing sources of funding have been identified that could bolster the Denton County phase of the I-35E project to \$1.1 billion. These include \$50 billion in potential Regional Toll Revenue funds from the county and repayments to the county for unrelated highway projects.

"Denton County is willing to leverage at this point \$100 million of their own money to continue to get 35E moving along," Morris said.

The Regional Transportation Council has until June to approve the plan, Morris said. Final formula allocations are forthcoming, he said.

"This is a conversation that's already begun between TxDOT and the legislature to create an opportunity of what potentially we could all do statewide to create an environment that creates a more positive opportunity for potential revenue," he said.

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