



Five years later, is Trinity toll road still a good idea?

By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER

Transportation Writer

mlindenberg@dallasnews.com

Published: 21 April 2012 10:55 PM

One thing hasn't changed in the long-running debate over the Trinity Parkway: Its champions still say a new six-lane toll road along the river is the best bet for easing highway traffic through downtown Dallas.

But five years after voters narrowly decided to keep the toll road in the larger vision for redeveloping the Trinity, many other arguments used to woo voters have been rendered moot. And, perhaps as important, the political dynamics have changed.

As the city gears up in a few weeks to consider — and, as expected, reaffirm — its preference to put the toll road between the river and the eastern flood-control levee, longtime critics have emerged again to ask: Should it be built at all?

A majority of City Council members still support the road. However, Angela Hunt, who led the petition drive that forced the 2007 referendum, has been joined by two colleagues who think the road is a bad idea no matter where it's built: Scott Griggs and former transportation committee chairwoman Sandy Greyson. Both have spoken out strongly.

It's the silence from another new face, though, that might speak the loudest.

[Mayor Mike Rawlings](#), who replaced strong toll road proponent [Tom Leppert](#), has been far more ambivalent, at least publicly.

Rawlings has not said where he will come down on any vote that sends a recommendation to the [Federal Highway Administration](#). He said Thursday that he will wait until he submits a statement as part of the "public participation process" that accompanies a May 8 public hearing.

In an email, the mayor said the city must balance its need to fix a traffic problem downtown with equally grand plans to transform the Trinity River floodway into one of the nation's largest urban parks, with lakes, trees and open fields.

"Moving forward, we must always strive to construct this project in a fashion that maximizes the true potential beauty that the Trinity River brings to our city as well as the open space it provides," he said.

"But we also have a transportation problem in the core of our city that must be addressed. These two items must be intertwined with one another and work hand-in-glove."

The mayor added that he wants to "honor the decisions the citizens and City Council of Dallas have made" while at the same time living up to his duty "to examine and optimize every aspect of this project."

Work toward the proposed road has been stopped while the U.S. [Army Corps of Engineers](#) works through concerns about the integrity of Dallas' levee system.

And, there remains the problem of how to pay for it.

The [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) conceded after the 2007 vote that it is probably \$1 billion short of funds needed to build the road. It still is.

Making a case

During the campaign leading up to the 2007 referendum, the transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, [Michael Morris](#), relentlessly laid out a case for the road.

At a council committee meeting, he explained that stopping the toll road "would have devastating consequences for residents of the city."

A route outside the levees, he said, would cost too much, perhaps \$500 million more. [Indeed](#), an analysis of routes released by the FHWA this month said building near the east levee would cost \$1.76 billion, about \$1 billion less than options along Riverfront Boulevard.

Meanwhile, some other arguments Morris made for the road have melted away.

Morris told the council in 2007 that not building the toll road would jeopardize \$1 billion in state funding needed to expand Interstates 35E and 30 through

downtown Dallas, a massive effort known as Project Pegasus.

That argument was featured in pro-toll road commercials during the referendum campaign. Twenties and \$100 bills were shown floating down the Trinity under the caption: "Don't let Angela Hunt send more than \$1 billion down the river."

It turned out, though, there wasn't any money for the overall Pegasus Project, and there still isn't. Last year, the Regional Transportation Council officially shelved the project until at least 2035. Only a portion of it remains.

Now, Morris argues that the lack of money for the Pegasus as previously envisioned only makes the case for the toll road that much stronger: The city needs traffic relief, he says.

"The Trinity is more important to us given the fact that the Pegasus project is being pushed out into the future," he said.

Morris also argued in 2007 that without the toll road in place as a "reliever route," work on the Pegasus would be impossible. Drivers would have no alternatives during the construction period and traffic would be hopelessly snarled.

He still says that, even though most of Pegasus has been put on hold, perhaps for decades.

"This is still true," Morris said. "Our intention is to redo the Pegasus project and bring it back for significantly less money, and the point remains that those improvements won't be able to be made without the Trinity [toll road] in place."

However, many of the improvements that were part of Project Pegasus have gotten off the ground while the toll road got bogged down in worries over the levees.

Texas Department of Transportation engineers reassessed the assumption that the toll road was needed as a first step. They eventually decided that important elements of the project, including replacement bridges for both I-30 and I-35E, could proceed.

Morris helped find the money, and design for the nearly \$800 million project, the so-called Horseshoe, is under way.

Another pro-toll road argument from 2007: Without the parkway, the dangerous curve where State Highway 175 turns east — known as Dead Man's Curve — couldn't be fixed. One end of the parkway would be at the curve, and the projects were tied together.

However, Morris told the City Council this month that work on the eliminating the hazardous curve is moving ahead of schedule, whether or not the toll road is built.

'A greater need'

Asked whether the changing circumstances since 2007 render arguments for the toll road moot, Morris was blunt.

"Obviously, disagree," Morris said. "In fact, I think it creates a greater need for the Trinity Parkway."

He said area drivers need the extra 10 miles of six-lane highway to ease worsening traffic. He said that by 2035, the toll road would shoulder 29 percent of the traffic that would otherwise use the lower Stemmons Corridor between Dallas and Irving. That's about 123,000 vehicles a day.

The so-called Canyon — I-30 just south of downtown — will get a similar break, he said.

According to an annual national traffic study conducted by Texas A&M University, Dallas-area traffic hardly rates among the top 40 most-congested road segments in America.

The 2011 study found that the segment of I-30 westbound between Saint Francis Avenue and Griffin Street ranks 34th in the extra time motorists need to get to work on time. Southbound I-35E from Empire Central to I-30 ranked 38th.

Hunt and other critics don't disagree that traffic is bad along I-35E and elsewhere in Dallas. But they say that just easing traffic won't necessarily make things better for the city, and that the city should be considering alternatives.

"We've expanded lots of lanes of road over the past decade and yet our city did not grow in the last census," Hunt said. "I think that is significant. That is what we got for our highway money. We've allowed people to move further and further away."

The toll road, she said, would only be "making it easier for drivers from one suburb to get to another without taking them through downtown, through the most congested part of the city."

Better mass transit is part of the answer, she said. That, along with bike paths, protected cross walks, a local circulator for downtown — those are the things that are missing, and what keep many would-be riders in their cars, she said.

"That is where Dallas has utterly failed. We haven't invested in that," she said.

Griggs said last week that the drive for the toll road shows that Dallas is "addicted to the automobile."

“Adding lane capacity is like an obese person buying a bigger belt and saying he doesn’t have a weight problem,” Griggs said.

Morris agrees that highways aren’t the only answer for Dallas’ traffic problems. He said that has been part of the plan since the state first called for the Trinity toll road in its 1998 report.

He said the report aimed to review all options and “try to eliminate the need for the facility at all.”

The options included trying to increase population and employment in southern Dallas, reducing the need to cross I-30, and additional rail lines, among others. But the report, and the advisory committee behind it, concluded that Dallas still needs a new highway.

And the debate continues.

Grassroots effort?

For now, there is nothing like the grassroots opposition that Hunt led to force the 2007 referendum. Hunt said she has no interest in leading another petition campaign.

Dallas’ charter allows residents to petition changes to city ordinances, but it’s not an easy process. Groups must register a petition with the city secretary, then collect signatures from 10 percent of the city’s registered voters.

City officials said this past week that that would require about 54,000 signatures now.

If the signatures are verified, the question goes to the council. If the council rejects the proposal, it is automatically put on the next ballot as a yes-or-no question.

Hunt said getting the signatures, and especially waging the campaign, is an uphill battle.

“The contractors and engineering firms have a vested interest and they are likely going to invest just as much time and money as possible. So whoever takes on this effort, if someone does, will again have a real challenge,” she said.

Still, some Dallas residents are trying to rekindle opposition. This week, a [Facebook](#) group surfaced: Kill the Trinity River Toll Road.

An online petition at [MoveOn.org](#) also surfaced. Neither effort had gathered more than 100 or so supporters as of late last week.

IF YOU GO

Parkway hearing

The [Dallas City Council](#) will soon vote on its preferred route for the proposed Trinity Parkway. That preference goes to the Federal Highway Administration, which ultimately decides where the road can be built. If approved by the FHWA, the road could open by 2019.

The council process includes a public hearing that presents a chance for residents to submit comments about the road in person or in writing.

When: May 8 at 7 p.m.

Where: Dallas Convention Center

Comments in writing: Written comments will be accepted until May 18. Send them to trinityparkway@ntta.org.

