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DFW Connector project in Grapevine may be finished a year early

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GRAPEVINE -- For nearly 21/2 years, drivers have endured a painful commute through the massive reconstruction of Texas 114/121 in Grapevine.

But keep an eye on the road ahead, because there's a proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

The \$1 billion DFW Connector project is actually way ahead of schedule -- by at least nine months and possibly a year, according to several public officials who are regularly briefed on its progress.

If the project stays on its current course -- and the weather cooperates -- drivers who originally expected to be dodging orange barrels and concrete barriers until July 2014 may instead be driving on a substantially complete freeway between July and September of next year.

"They're a little more than a year away, which is pretty phenomenal for a job that size," said Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes of Southlake. "If this had been built under the old system of building roads in Texas, and built in sections, it would have been 12 to 15 years before they were done. If you're a contractor on a 41/2-year project, and you're building it in 31/2 years, you're saving a lot of money."

Making progress

Officials with the main contractor, NorthGate Constructors, downplayed how far ahead the project is. They make no promises beyond the original time frame, about 57 months, as spelled out in NorthGate's October 2009 agreement with the state.

But they are meeting regularly with Grapevine business owners and providing regular updates about construction progress.

"Right now the DFW Connector project is 66 percent complete, and we're looking to be finished nine months to one year ahead of schedule," spokeswoman Kristen Schropp said in an e-mail.

The business owners are taking a cautious approach.

"I'd rather underpromise and overdeliver," said Perry Leonard, president of Blagg Tire and Service, who steers a business owners task force that meets regularly with NorthGate. "But at the same time, it's encouraging that things are moving forward."

On the 8-mile corridor's west side, the first half of the new William D. Tate Avenue bridge is open, as is the new westbound Texas 114 frontage road over Texas 26 and the railroad, between Farm Road 1709 and Tate Avenue.

During the next few months, workers will finish the new 1709 bridge to Northwest Highway and demolish old bridges.

In May, westbound Texas 114's main lanes from Tate Avenue to 1709 will be put into service, although they won't be in their final configuration. Crews will still be working on the other side of the highway.

Work is also moving quickly on giant flyover ramps connecting eastbound Texas 114 to southbound Texas 121. When they're complete, drivers will be able to go from 114 in Southlake and Trophy Club to 121 in Grapevine and Euless without stopping at three traffic signals on Tate Avenue.

On the east side, at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport's north entrance, the International Parkway bridge over 114 and the westbound 114 bridge into the airport are done. Crews are working on the connection from southbound 121 to westbound 114.

The DFW Connector is on course to be 85 percent complete by year's end, said Randy Redmond, director of the Texas Department of Transportation's DFW strategic projects office. The remaining work will probably be less intrusive for drivers, he said.

In other words, the days of temporary freeway lanes moving around overnight are nearing an end.

Around-the-clock work

Dry weather played a huge role in the road work's progress.

Also, it is a design-build project, meaning that the lead contractor can design and build portions of the job simultaneously. That halves the time it normally takes to build highways, state transportation officials say.

Texas law allows design-build projects only in limited circumstances, including highway projects that add toll lanes, as the DFW Connector does.

Another factor: NorthGate Constructors, a joint venture of Kiewit Texas of Fort Worth and Zachry Construction of San Antonio, is working around the clock. Most lane closures occur at night to minimize impact on peak travel periods.

The DFW Connector is funded by \$667 million in state gas tax revenue, \$250 million in federal stimulus money and \$107 million in voter-approved Proposition 14 state bond funds that must be repaid over about 20 years with future gas tax revenue.

More money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is being spent on the DFW Connector than on any other transportation project in the nation.

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