

Assessment of Trinity Parkway routes: Levee route is cheaper, faster

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A long-awaited assessment of possible routes for the Trinity River toll road is likely to boost efforts by the city of Dallas to build the highway between the Trinity River levees.

The cheapest, fastest and arguably least-disruptive choice for the road is to build it between the river and the east levee, just as the city of Dallas has insisted for years, says the report prepared for the Federal Highway Administration.

Although the new document, ordered in 2009 and finished last month, gives powerful ammunition to City Hall, it does not guarantee final approval. A levee route must be approved by the highway administration, which will rule as soon as this fall, and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The corps has spent more than five years warning the city that building a high-speed toll road within a sensitive floodway has never been done and poses regulatory challenges.

The report appears to address some of those concerns by conceding that building the road between the levees will stress the flood protection system by producing a slight rise in water levels during floods.

Water would rise about six inches in a 100-year flood if the road is built where the city hopes it will be, the report said. A second levee alternative would trigger a 14-inch rise. But in the document, NTTA asserts that the higher water levels are negligible and manageable through engineering.

Elected leaders and city staff have been pushing for the levee route for years and beat back a 2007 referendum aimed at stopping the road. Their challenge is that federal law prohibits the toll road from being built between the levees unless there is no "practicable alternative."

One alternative, practicable or not, is to run the road between the levees and downtown, along Riverfront Boulevard. Two versions of that plan were included in the report: one elevated above the current road and one at grade. Both are far more expensive and disruptive than the levee routes, the report found.

"One of the key things to accomplish in this document was to lay out the facts so that the Federal Highway Administration can make a determination as to whether any practicable alternatives exist" to the levee routes, said Dan Chapman, the Trinity toll road project manager for the North Texas Tollway Authority, which authored the study.

"The biggest part of what we did is just serving up information that would help them make that determination."

Chapman stressed that the document does not contain a recommendation or make conclusions about where the road should go. That's a decision the highway administration will make, he said.

Instead, the document — hundreds of pages laid out in four large volumes — provides data on what appears to be every imaginable detail of the proposed tollway routes.

A hearing May 8 at the Dallas Convention Center will allow the public to weigh in.

Before the highway administration will choose a route, each question raised at the hearing, or submitted in writing, will have to be answered for the record.

For all that, it is hard to read the report as anything other than a marshaling of the best arguments the city and its fellow toll road supporters can make in favor of the levee routes. Page after page presents a side-by-side comparison of the four routes, and at almost every point the levee routes — often the particular route favored by the city — come out looking better.

It's cheaper. At \$1.76 billion, the price for building the road near the east levee is about \$1 billion less than building either option for the Riverfront Boulevard route.

It's less intrusive. The documents prepared by NTTA argue that the Riverfront routes would hinder the city's development plans, and they would.

Dallas would like to develop Riverfront Boulevard extensively, and putting a 200-foot-wide elevated highway over the top probably would interfere. The levee route also would require only 35 buildings to be condemned, compared with 245 if the highway administration selects the Riverfront Boulevard route.

It's faster. NTTA wrote that all federal approvals for the toll road — including those from the corps — could be in hand by early 2014, no matter which levee route is chosen. But construction for the Riverfront options would take years longer. The city's preferred route could be complete by 2019, the document says.

The document also stresses that some potential effects from a levee route are still being studied, including the possible impact on historic property and wetlands. In addition, no one associated with the project has come up with a way to pay for it, since NTTA has stated that it believes tolls would support only a fraction of the cost of the road, no matter where it is built.

The new document is sure to stir up many of the same debates that dogged the 2007 campaign, including whether a six-lane highway can ever be compatible with the park-like setting envisioned for the floodway as part of the massive Trinity River Corridor Project.

Although much of the debate will sound familiar, much has changed since 2007, too.

Two of the road's biggest supporters have left the council, and in their places are critics of the road, Scott Griggs and Sandy Greyson.

Mayor Mike Rawlings, who did not respond to interview requests Friday, took a wait-and-see attitude about the road during his campaign last year. It was the grander vision for the parks, lake, new bridges and other elements of the Trinity River plan that mattered most, he said.

City Manager Mary Suhm and Assistant City Manager Jill Jordan, who have steered the city toward a road within the levees, also could not be reached for comment.

Vonciel Jones Hill, chairwoman of the City Council's Trinity River Corridor Project Committee, said she has discussed the report's findings with the city staff, even though she hadn't yet read it. She said it's a good step.

"We will be listening closely to what the public says, but I believe it's good news," she said. "It's what I'd hoped for."

For many who opposed the toll road in 2007 and since, the question about where to build the road is the wrong one to ask. They've been asking for years: Why build it at all?

Council member Angela Hunt, who led the petition drive that nearly severed the toll road from the Trinity park plan, has argued that a toll road at or above Riverfront Boulevard is just about as bad an idea as one between the levees.

"It's a grave disappointment for me that after 14 years we cannot expend a minuscule amount of money to build trails within our levees, and yet there's this thrill and excitement surrounding the idea of spending \$2 billion on a toll road that at this point is still unfunded," she said Friday.

Greyson opposed the toll road when it was proposed during Laura Miller's administration and campaigned with Hunt to oppose it in 2007. She hasn't changed her mind now that she has rejoined the council for a new term.

"It was a bad idea then, and it's a bad idea now," she said.

Griggs said the toll road is too big to coexist with the riverfront park. Illustrations in the highway administration report seem to indicate that at some points along the river there will be little space left for much of anything but highway.

"It's much different than the [earlier] drawings which show a thin-ribbon toll road with lots of green space on the downtown side, between the toll road and the river," he said.

Staff writer Steve Thompson contributed to this report.

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