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State finds funds that will boost I-35E overhaul between Dallas, Denton

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An unexpected funding bonanza from state highway officials has boosted plans to widen Interstate 35E between Dallas and Denton, transportation director Michael Morris of the North Central Texas Council of Governments said Thursday.

Texas Department of Transportation officials have announced that $500 million in unexpected funds is available for the Dallas region, and Morris said about $314 million of that will be used on the 28-mile overhaul of I-35E.

That project, still under federal environmental review, would add a new lane in each direction between LBJ Freeway in Dallas and U.S. Highway 380 just north of downtown Denton. In addition, two reversible toll lanes would be added to the center of the interstate and a second bridge over Lewisville Lake would be constructed.

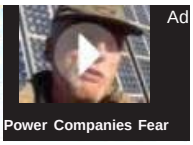
The toll lanes, like the ones that will be part of LBJ Freeway when that project is completed, would be managed. That means they would be priced according to traffic demand, with tolls that are several times traditional toll rates during rush hours.

In addition, new ramps would ease connections between Sam Rayburn Tollway and the Bush Turnpike, and the project would also lower Belt Line Road in downtown Carrollton to improve traffic there, Morris said.

In all, the project would cost about $1.2 billion. Pending approvals by various agencies, construction could start within about a year and take five years.

Without the new money from Austin, some of the improvements to the free roads would have to wait, Morris said.

The rest of the money from Austin has been steered toward a collection of smaller initiatives, though a final vote on the distribution won't come till this summer. Members of the Texas Transportation Commission have the ultimate say on how state dollars are spent, but regional authorities have been told their decisions will be honored in this case.

Texas Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said money continues to be tight at TxDOT, but he said the agency was able to squeeze its budget for a one-time savings of about $2 billion to produce the windfall.

Morris explained that the new money is a result of some projects costing less than state engineers had forecast, lower-than-expected interest rates and other savings that added up over time.