

Home > Transportation Blog

Armed with new data from toll road critics, Rawlings says he wants answers from TxDOT, could reconsider toll road support

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Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings said Wednesday it is not too late for the city to change its position on the controversial Trinity River toll road, should new doubts about its benefits raised by three colleagues of his on the city council prove well-founded.

Rawlings voiced support for the toll road in a speech earlier this month, ending a year-long silence on the project by coming out forcefully in favor of its necessity. In doing so, he touted the toll road's ability to ease traffic into and out of downtown by providing drivers an alternative route to congested Interstates 30 and 35.

"That was the primary force for me in supporting the toll road," Rawlings said today.

But over the past couple of weeks questions raised by three of his colleagues on Dallas City Council have put his initial conclusion to the test, he said. As a result he said today that he has asked state transportation officials to clarify those benefits and provide a matrix that will compare benefits of costs of the Trinity toll road with a second option, namely improving existing Interstates 35 and 30. Those improvements constitute the remaining portions of a long-planned but recently discarded Project Pegasus.

Council members Angela Hunt, Sandy Greyson and Scott Griggs have shown him data and other information from state officials they believe prove that the toll road is both more expensive and less effective than improving Interstates 30 and 35, Rawlings said.

The new information contrasts with the answers he got when he was forming his opinion of the Trinity toll road, Rawlings said. As a result he has given TxDOT 30 days to present a

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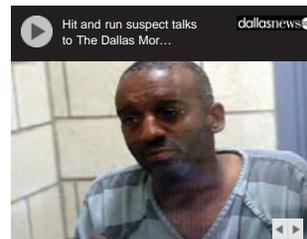
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simple matrix with the two approaches' costs and benefits side-by-side.

"When I met with advisers and experts about Project Pegasus and the toll road, I was told the cost for Pegasus was not only prohibitive but that the funding wasn't there. The questions raised in the last few days are good questions. I've re-assessed the numbers and am trying to get my questions answered," he said.

Rawlings said he spoke to TxDOT's Bill Hale to make his request. He said he asked for the information within 30 days. And once he gets it, he said his obligation will be to support whichever approach to relieving traffic in downtown Dallas moves the most people as safely and efficiently as possible — even if that means turning against the toll road.

"The numbers they were showing were markedly different than the numbers I had seen before," he said. "That caught my eye. My obligation to the taxpayers is to support the approach that moves the most people and in the most efficient manner. We're trying to make Dallas the most liveable place we can."

Rawlings said his position on the toll has not changed. "I'm supportive of the toll road. But any time we have new data that helps shine light on the situation, I am very interested in looking at that. I appreciate Scott and Angela and Sandy's hard work in trying to look at these options," Rawlings said.

He said he expects the answers from Hale to support the toll road, explaining that he thinks Griggs and his colleagues have misinterpreted the information they've received from TxDOT, but that he wants to make sure.

"I think there has been some misinterpretation of emails and conversations and a lot of 'this person said this and that person said that,' so I am creating a matrix with the data I need ... and I am going to have TxDOT fill that out with their best estimates for each question," he said. "I am not asking them to make policy; I just want them to give me the facts. And that facts will be what we base our decision on."

I've asked TxDOT many of the same questions in recent weeks, and staff members — including Hale and others — initially told me on the record that completing the Pegasus would provide just as effective a traffic relief as building the Trinity toll road.

The costs for each approach appeared similar too, given that the remaining portions of the Pegasus were estimated to cost \$1.2 billion in 2009 dollars, and the toll road is estimated to cost \$1.4 billion in current dollars.

TxDOT, however, has pulled back those responses to me and now says that the \$1.2 billion figure would be much higher, once all costs are considered — including engineering, right of way and the cost of mitigating traffic during construction of the I-30 segment in the Canyon just east of downtown. They are unable to say how much more it would cost.

I'm still working through the details of their positions, and will make better sense of the discrepancies soon. Meanwhile, Michael Morris, a key toll road supporter and transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, energetically pushed back against the idea that the Pegasus project would be a suitable, much less preferable, alternative to the Trinity river toll road.

In an interview Tuesday he said the Pegasus project would be much more expensive, much less effective and lack any meaningful potential for tolling — a factor that would make it even more expensive by comparison to the toll road.

He went further: The Pegasus Project, once touted as the top priority for fixing downtown traffic, no longer makes any sense to build at all — even if the toll road is unable to be built for other reasons. It's too expensive and produces too few traffic benefits, he said.

If the toll road isn't built, then the traffic fixes will likely go elsewhere, besides downtown Dallas, he said.

He said a scaled-back Pegasus plan to help improve traffic flow is still in the works, but that its costs and its benefits would be much smaller than the original fixes proposed for the corridor.

I'll have more from Hunt and her colleagues soon but for now Rawlings adds that he's just happy that the debate over the Trinity has focused on the traffic problems it's supposed to fix.

"I am happy we are debating one of the real big issues we have got, and that is the gridlock in our mixmaster and how we are going to resolve that. That was the primary force for me in supporting the toll road. ... Now it seems like we are all aligned to solve this traffic issue."

Rawlings said he has asked TxDOT to present him "simple numbers, no words" to answer the following questions about each of the two approaches: How many lanes would they add? How much highway capacity would each add? How long would each take to build? How much would each cost? What additional costs should be expected related to traffic difficulties during the construction period? Where would the funding come from? Is there a possibility for private investors to help fund the project? Can the lanes be tolled?

If the answers favor a change in support from the city, Rawlings said he has no problem changing his mind over the Trinity. "Until the check is written, our obligation is to keep asking if we are doing the right thing."

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