



## ⦿ Dallas mayor: Trinity toll road is 'right thing for the future'

By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER

Transportation Writer

[mlindenberg@dallasnews.com](mailto:mlindenberg@dallasnews.com)

Published: 02 May 2012 02:44 PM

Dallas needs the Trinity River toll road, and needs it between the levees, [Mayor Mike Rawlings](#) said Wednesday in his first public comments on the highway, which continues to be controversial half a decade after voters last endorsed it.

If the Trinity Parkway isn't built, Dallas will find it increasingly difficult to add jobs and people downtown, traffic will keep getting worse and efforts to bridge the city's historic north-south divide could come to naught, the mayor said.

Rawlings' comments ended his year of silence on the topic that defined — and in many ways dominated — the early tenure of predecessor [Tom Leppert](#).

He emerged squarely behind the project. Armed with a letter of support from the U.S. [Army Corps of Engineers](#), Rawlings said the toll road won't harm flood protection, won't mess up the park projects also proposed for the floodway and will be a wise investment. [Dallas mayor shows support for Trinity River toll road](#)

"After considering those three questions, I believe building the parkway inside the levees is the right thing for the future of Dallas," Rawlings said in a speech at City Hall.

At the same time, he conceded that funding for the project has not been identified. He also acknowledged that, as envisioned now, the road will have no direct access to Interstates 30 or 35E in southern Dallas — a key shortcoming that he says must be fixed.

The road, which would run along the Trinity nine miles from State Highway 183 west of downtown to Interstate 45 southeast of downtown, was first approved by voters in 1998 as part of a larger overhaul of the Trinity floodway.

Residents opposed to the road nearly killed it in 2007, putting a yes-no vote on the ballot that sparked a furious grass-roots fight. A coalition of Dallas' business, cultural and political establishment joined forces to defeat the effort to kill the project.

Despite the toll road victory, the project has been mostly stalled since then. It became clear that there was no plan to find the \$1.8 billion needed to pay for the road. And when the levees that protect Dallas from flooding flunked a 2009 inspection, the [Federal Highway Administration](#) called for a new study of whether the toll road plans were feasible in light of the improvements planned for the levees.

The report, over hundreds of pages, lays out the feasibility of five options: Two routes inside the levee system, two outside and an option to build no road. The city has long favored an option that has all lanes of the toll road running along the eastern levee.

### Hearing spurred decision

A public hearing to discuss that report, released this spring, is scheduled for Tuesday at the Dallas Convention Center. Rawlings said it was the hearing — and pressure from toll road proponents such as City Manager [Mary Suhm](#) — that convinced him it was time to make his own views known.

During his speech, Rawlings was flanked by nearly all members of the [Dallas City Council](#), most of whom strongly support the project. The three members who oppose the road were not invited but showed up anyway.

Council member Angela Hunt, who led the failed 2007 referendum, said Rawlings and the city are continuing down a dangerous path.

"No one else in the world has built a billion-dollar road in a flood system," Hunt said. "This is not an experiment the city of Dallas should do."

While signaling his support for the road part of the Trinity project, Rawlings said he also has asked Suhm to present a plan by June for fast-tracking recreational development, especially projects that would connect Oak Cliff to the river. He'd like to see those projects finished in the next three years, he said.

Rawlings cited powerful support from the Corps of Engineers, an agency that has continually signaled throughout the years that winning approval for the unprecedented project would be difficult.

The mayor said Brig. Gen. Thomas W. Kula, the corps' Dallas-based southwestern division commander, had assured him that the project is safe and, going further, that the city is right to proceed with it, he said.

"I told him straight out, 'I am going to move forward with this and you need to tell me if there is anything I need to know that would cause it to stop,'" Rawlings

told *The Dallas Morning News*. "He told me, 'You are doing the right thing by moving forward.'"

A letter sent to the mayor by the corps' [Fort Worth](#) division commander, Col. Richard J. Muraski Jr., echoed that point and said the levees were stronger than initially believed following the 2009 inspection. Further study, the letter said, showed that the toll road proposal is "feasible."

"The corps' role in the parkway project is to ensure that the selected alternative does not impact the levee system nor impair its ability to function as designed. Initial indications suggest that the proposed Trinity Parkway is feasible from the corps' perspective," the letter reads.

Rawlings said he took that to mean the corps is leaning toward approval of two permits that will be required before construction can begin — assuming that the Federal Highway Administration agrees that a road should be built within the levees.

Assistant City Manager Jill [Jordan](#) said Rawlings was right, and caveats in the letter were simply legalities that are always attached to pronouncements from the corps on sensitive projects.

The corps itself would not go that far Tuesday. In response to questions from *The News*, a public affairs officer said, "The preliminary analysis indicates the tollway is feasible."

"However, final approval of the 404 and 408 [permits] is subject to completion of all technical analysis and design," said spokeswoman Martie Cencki.

One of the permits, dealing with impacts to flood protection, will have to be personally approved by the corps' top general at the [Pentagon](#), she said.

So was the mayor overly optimistic?

Cencki said only that the city has made a lot of progress — "all very positive actions" — since the failed inspection.

"It's reasonable for the mayor to be optimistic," Cencki said.

Rawlings said he spoke to hundreds of people about the toll road, but his "aha moment" came when he decided that working against it could undo his commitment to spur economic growth in southern Dallas. The toll road will play an essential role in connecting the south and north, he said.

He conceded, however, that drivers looking to get on or off the toll road to reach either I-30 or I-35E near the river will be out of luck. Plans for the toll road, at this point, do not feature connections to either.

"That's unacceptable," he said. He said he has told city staff that they must find a way to correct that problem, though where the city might find the tens of millions of dollars such an effort would be likely to cost has not been determined.

Another consideration for the mayor was what he said is the necessity for Dallas to fix its traffic problems before they begin to slow economic vitality. He cited studies that the toll road will divert a quarter or more of traffic from downtown highways.

## Not another L.A.

"Frankly, I don't want to be L.A., covered in concrete and with the poor air quality. And on the other hand, as much as I love Austin, I don't want to be that type of city with the major traffic gridlock they experience every day just because they didn't come to terms with the problems they faced," he said.

But City Council member Scott Griggs said Tuesday that modern cities are finding other ways to combat traffic rather than adding more highways that will eventually fill up. "We're missing the forest for the trees," he said.

Rawlings said, though, that it is simply not accurate to fault Dallas for relying solely on highways to solve its transportation problems. He pointed to efforts at developing bike lanes and the investment in [Dallas Area Rapid Transit](#).

Hunt wasn't convinced.

"The city talks a good game about complete streets," she said. "I want you to look at where the city puts its money. It's 99.9 percent streets" built solely for cars.

In the end, Rawlings said one thing he hopes he's been crystal clear on is that he's a mayor who believes in growth — and without the new road, growth may not happen here, he said.

"I don't really love roads; I don't think many of us do," he said. "But if done right, they can be a major catalyst for growth. Just ask the pioneer who settled on the Trinity because he knew this would be a transportation hub. We must help Dallas, and especially southern Dallas, to grow by continuing to be that hub."

Staff writer Rudolph Bush contributed to this report.



