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TxDOT brass tells agency to work with NTTA, RTC in preparing Trinity answers for Rawlings



comments (6)

By Michael Lindenberg
mlindenberg@dallasnews.com
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The Texas Department of Transportation will answer Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings' questions about the Trinity River toll road — and answer them soon, top state transportation officials said Tuesday.

But when the answers come they won't just be TxDOT answers. Instead, they will have first been jointly crafted with two local agencies who have made their strong preference for the toll road well known over the years.

That approach comes at the direction of TxDOT's top official in North Texas, former Fort Worth city council member Bill Meadows, one of five highway chiefs appointed to the Texas Transportation Commission by Gov. Rick Perry.

"It is important to remember that the proposed Trinity Parkway is not a TxDOT project," he said in an email to The News Tuesday, adding that NTTA has taken the lead on it. "Additionally, the RTC is a major transportation partner on the Dallas projects both from a funding and planning perspective and has studied both projects extensively. Therefore, I have suggested to the senior staff leadership of the three entities that they come together and restudy the issues that have been raised related to both the Trinity and the Pegasus Projects and to formulate responses to the questions raised."

In a follow-up phone call, Meadows said it would be folly — and maybe a tad arrogant — for TxDOT to presume to answer the questions raised by Rawlings without consulting the RTC and NTTA. Those agencies know the projects best, he said.

But in doing so, Meadows has asked TxDOT to step out of the line of fire that began with comments from its chief Dallas engineer, Bill Hale. Hale, who has routinely avoided questions about whether the toll road *should* be built by saying it's the locals who make those policy decisions, has nevertheless shared some numbers that some have said call into question the wisdom of building it.

He provided three council members with numbers they say call into question the region's decision last year to abandon what was once known as Project Pegasus while remaining supportive of the toll road.

Last year, the RTC voted to trim its long-range transportation plan by nearly \$50 billion; among the many cast-off projects was the Pegasus, which at one time was touted as the major fix needed for downtown traffic. In 2007, the toll road's ability to help make the Pegasus construction easier was one of its major justifications as supporters beat back an attempt by some voters to reject the toll road.

More recently, as attention on the toll road has resumed, Dallas City Council members Angela Hunt, Scott Griggs and Sandy Greyson have maintained that choosing the toll road over the Pegasus last year was a mistake. They say Hale's estimates for the construction costs and traffic benefits of the Pegasus approach show that it would be better, and cheaper, than building the toll road.

Rawlings has said he believes the toll road remains the best option, but conceded that the numbers Hunt and company showed him from Hale are so "markedly" different, he needed answers from TxDOT.

Meadows said any answers the agency gives to Rawlings will first be jointly developed by the three agencies.

In our call, I suggested to Meadows that by arranging the response this way, he may be eliminating the opportunity TxDOT had to play a neutral role in the still-simmering debate over whether to build the toll road. After all, it was TxDOT's Hale whose responses to Griggs and company triggered the latest round of questions.



Mayor Mike Rawlings announced his support for the Trinity toll road May 2. Now he wants answers from TxDOT about whether another approach favored by some council members would be cheaper, better, as they contend. (DMN Photo.)

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He has since said he feels the numbers were misinterpreted. And, as Meadows acknowledged, he has been asked to rein in his comments about the project, letting Meadows — as one of the agency's policy makers — speak for the agency on the Trinity.

The problem is, Hale didn't stir this debate up by unwisely presuming to judge the toll road as a policy option. That would have been an overstep on his part, but he didn't do anything of the kind. He simply provided answers to questions about what the costs and benefits — from a technical point of view — were for each of the two approaches. How much would it cost to do A, and what kind of impact would that have on traffic in downtown?

Those are questions he is supremely qualified to answer, much better than Meadows of course. Indeed, his agency itself is in a better position to answer those questions for Griggs, initially, than the other two partners Meadows has asked to be brought to the table. That's because NTTA has no involvement in the Project Pegasus, since it would (as least as of now) be a non-toll project. And as for the RTC, it could offer plenty of good insight — but the likelihood that its assertions will be accepted by toll road critics is less, given its longstanding and forceful advocacy for the toll road project.

For instance, RTC's staff director, Michael Morris, has lobbied hard for the toll road in recent years, and he has pushed back hard at any suggestion that TxDOT continues to see the Pegasus project as a viable alternative to the toll road. In a recent interview he said the benefits of the Pegasus were so small, and costs so high, that he would never support building that project — even if the toll road is never built.

To put a point on this: Morris may be absolutely right, but it's not the kind of background that will lend itself to impartiality. And if the answers to Rawlings' questions aren't accepted by Hunt, Greyson, and Griggs then they won't have done much to move the debate over the road any further along.

Meadows told me he had more faith in the process — and the local agencies like RTC and NTTA — than I appeared to have.

"I am attributing an element of good faith and trust and openness to the project that perhaps you don't share," he said. "You have to have the RTC there. Jesus, the RTC is the organization we have all committed to, invested in. It's our broad-based transportation planning organization and it has experience."

The thing to remember, it seems to me, is that for it to do any good at all, for anyone, Rawlings' exercise in "intellectual honesty" has to convince outside observers, even critics, that the numbers are solid and the comparisons they invite are apples-to-apples. Having them issued by a neutral, or disinterested, source would make that task easier.

Meadows said everyone — his agency, me — has an agenda, though he later conceded TxDOT doesn't have a dog in the fight over the Trinity. What's helpful, he said, is to have all the agendas out on the table.

"If you don't have them there for the discussion, that just doesn't make sense," he said. "You know what their agenda is. That's the good news. There is no hidden agenda with the RTC. They are advocates of building the Trinity Parkway.

"But I'd rather have all the potential project partners at the table."

I am not sure that's the right approach, but I've certainly been wrong before. The trick now is to wait to see how things shake out.

Meanwhile, I did figure, as long as everyone is coming together at that table, I'd just as soon have a seat myself — if they'd have me.

I wrote TxDOT's executive director in Austin, Phil Wilson, to ask for permission to sit in with the three parties when they develop the answers to Rawlings' questions — in the interest of transparency, of course.

Wilson wrote back Tuesday night to say that likely won't be necessary.

"Mr. Lindenberg, thank you for the inquiry," he wrote. "We did visit today and discussed the issue. A meeting may not be necessary for the work to be answered. We did discuss making sure that only existing plans and documents available to the public in the past would be the ones referenced and sourced. We did make assignments on who has the information relevant to the topic via prior completed studies or other questioned material."

Well there you have it. The meeting likely won't be a meeting at all, rather a gathering of sources. Let's hope those sources are easy to verify, and that the numbers and comparisons are easy to follow.

And let's hope, too, that the answers and the process help illuminate why TxDOT staff engineers have said in recent weeks that building the Pegasus would do as much to help relieve traffic in downtown Dallas as building the toll road — but now seemed poised to endorse a very different conclusion.

Some of the numbers Hale gave Griggs may have indeed been misunderstood or taken out of context. But that bottom-line statement — that the Pegasus improvements to existing highways would be as much help as the toll road — was also made to me in an hour-long discussion with two top engineers two weeks ago. I read back to them the conclusions I had gathered from the interview and they confirmed that it was accurate.

That's hard to misinterpret. Let's hope that the answers the mayors gets will come soon, and be equally difficult to misunderstand.

If not, the real losers will be everyone who hoped Rawlings' request could mean the end of the long debate over the toll road — or at least the end of the Pegasus-versus-The Trinity debate. Them, and TxDOT itself.



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Brenda Marks · Texas State University-San Marcos

TxDOT has more than 12,000 employees in professional, technical and support positions (according to its own website). It is the largest state agency in Texas. It is TxDOT's job ALONE to answer these questions and it has the data to provide them in an unbiased, technical way. For a Rick Perry political appointee to kick the can down the road to other politicians to answer is a blatant indication that the fix is in. Time to draft the FOI requests at every level.

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Bruce Richardson

Interestingly, we again have the appearance that it is everyone BUT Dallas who benefits from the Trinity Tollroad proposal, and Dallas which benefits most from Pegasus. It makes little sense to ask a "transportation authority" what we should do. That's rather like asking a surgeon if one should have surgery.

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Mary Warren

Thank you for this very informative piece.

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