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As we await TxDOT's Trinity answers, a question: What if our real problem is too many cars?



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By Michael Lindemberger
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What if the problem with our commutes is not just that they take too long, but they are too long in the first place? Even billions in tolled infrastructure, such as the DNT above, can't keep the cars moving freely in a fast-growing area like North Texas. (Louis DeLuca / Staff Photographer)

We're expecting to hear this week perhaps from TxDOT on its answer to the mayor of Dallas about the costs and benefits of building the Trinity River toll road compared to instead improving the existing highways in downtown Dallas.

That made [this morning's New York Times piece on fighting traffic congestion](#) in the world's most crowded cities especially timely. In a post on its environmental blog, Dot Earth, the Times notes:

"That's why one of the more important developments at [Rio+20](#), the United Nations sustainable

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Transportation writer Michael Lindemberger, reporter Theodore Kim and editorial writer Rodger Jones cover the subject from tollways to traffic, roads to rail. They invite tips and feedback from decision-makers and commuters alike.

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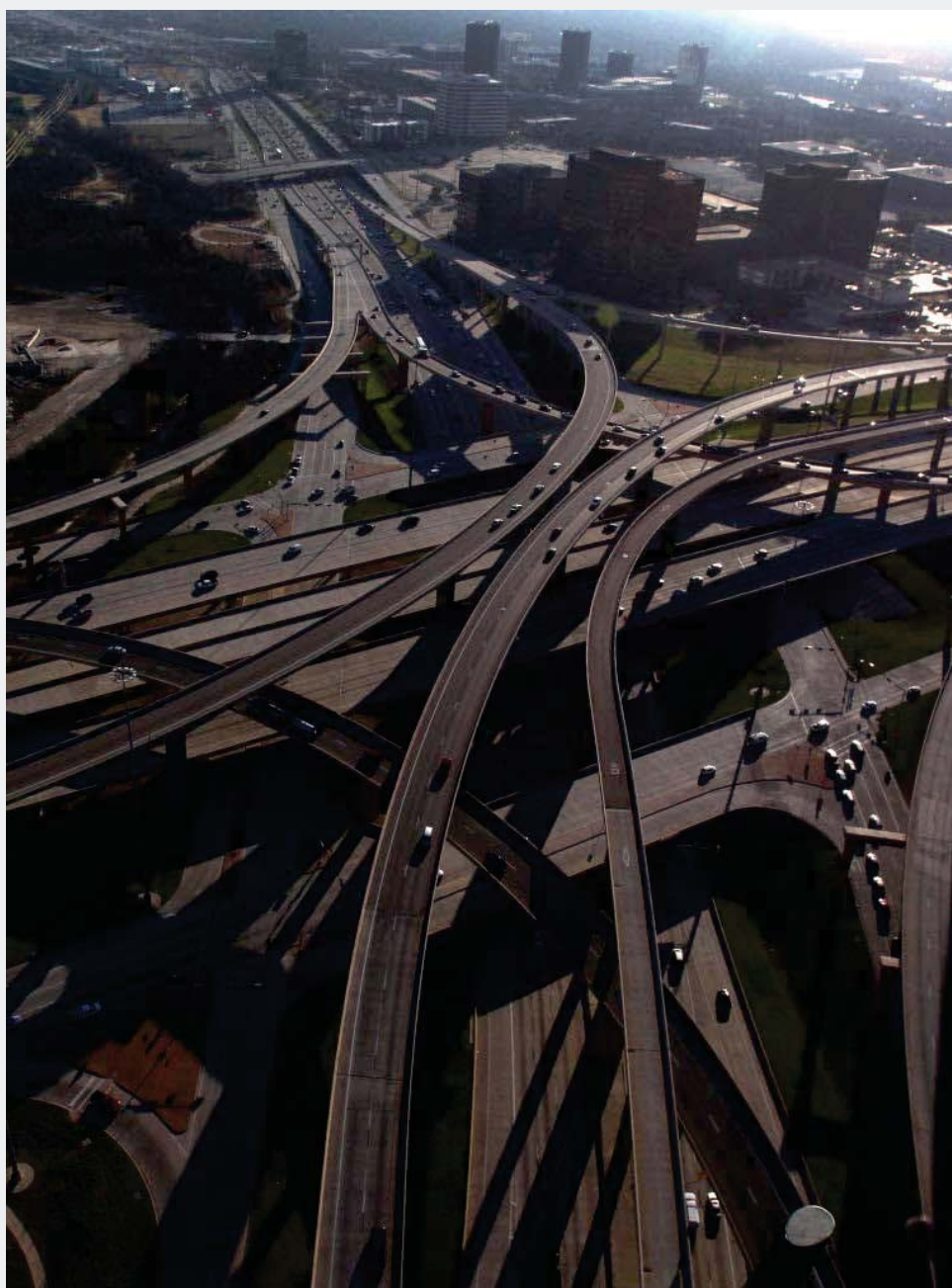
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development conference in Rio de Janeiro has nothing to do with the [tussles over the language](#) in the conference declaration; it came in a side event. Led by the Asian Development Bank, and nudged by the [Institute for Transportation and Development Policy](#) and other groups, the eight largest multilateral development banks have committed to lending \$175 billion over the next 10 years for transportation projects that cut urban congestion and limit pollution and energy waste."

Now, on one level that sounds like what we're doing here. Using the private sector, and all kinds of other tools, to build highways to limit congestion. It's the stated goal of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, and it shows up in every "purpose and need" document about a Dallas-area project.



Tolls and toll-leveraging has helped Texas spend billions in highways in the Dallas area in recent years -- even as state taxes for projects like the High Five dried up. (Louis DeLuca / Staff Photographer)

Easing traffic congestion has been the top priority for transportation spenders for years, During the George W. Bush Administration, that was the explicit goal of federal transportation spending. Under President Obama, that has changed to include other goals — boost development, adding "sustainability" as a measure, etc.

Not everyone likes the Obama administration's change of tone — not especially highway building lobbying interests, and not plenty of folks who believe the most helpful assistance they can receive from the government is a clearer path on the highway to work and back each day.

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But while that makes for a good debate on this blog and across the Twittersphere, the reality in North Texas is that we haven't changed our ways in any significant manner. Yes, there are some interesting projects going forward — a park over the highway, a plan for bike lanes, continued expansion of DART, and a starter street car line.

But we still love highways, and we still believe — if by belief we mean what we do, not what we say — that making highway commutes easier is the path to happiness.

The folks meeting in Rio are saying that's not enough. They agree with Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings that congestion is bad for business, and that means bad for cities. But they don't agree that making it easier for more cars to get through a corridor is the right approach.

From the press release from Asian Development Bank announcing the \$175 billion in ready investment for a greener transportation solution:

"Rapid motorization is creating more congestion, air pollution, traffic accidents and greenhouse gas emissions — especially in developing countries," said ADB President Haruhiko Kuroda, speaking on behalf of the MDBs at a news conference in Rio de Janeiro. "Developing countries have the opportunity to leapfrog to a greener future of less motorization, shorter commutes, and more energy efficient transport systems."

This is a big business decision. China, for instance, says that the jammed up traffic in its cities already shaves 5 percent off its Gross Domestic Product, no small matter. The Times' Andrew Revkin reached out to Michael Replogle, director of the [Institute for Transportation and Development](#), which helped nudge the banks to focus on this issue. He explained why it's so important to move away from highway-centered transportation planning.

"A billion people are moving to cities in the next 20 years," he said. "Having banks that have focused principally on building massive new roads focusing more on public transit, safer walking and [bicycling](#), pollution reduction and improved freight systems is a huge breakthrough."

What does all this mean for Dallas? Well consider the parallels: We're heard for years that North Texas is about to experience a population bomb. The numbers keep changing but the basic idea is that by 2040 we're going to have millions of more people here than we have now. They all bring cars and none of them bring highway capacity, as planners have been saying for years.

Our focus has been almost exclusively on highways — either build new ones or tolling the ones we have. In fact, even our embrace of tolling has been only further our dependence on highways. The money earned from tolls goes to pay off those toll roads, to operate them and — naturally — to build more roads.

There is a lot of lip service to other modes. Indeed, when Rawlings announced his support for the Trinity toll road, he said it was mainly because it would cure — or at least treat — congestion downtown. He also said it's just simply not true that Dallas hasn't looked to other modes to ease its transportation problems. There's the trolley, and the streetcar and DART and all those envisioned bike lanes.

Fair enough, but when you eat at a fancy steakhouse five nights a week, you haven't stopped being a glutton and a out-of-balance carnivore when you add berries to your cheerios in the mornings. (I am speaking from personal experience, of course.)

Despite the commitment to DART, what gets attention here is the highway improvements. Indeed, we've got something like \$10 billion in major highway projects underway at the moment. When all that is done, what will have? More capacity, to make room for more cars — and a bigger problem to solve in another 10 or 15 (or five) years when the traffic is at a standstill again.

I don't have any doubt that TxDOT, now that it is shopping its answers out to all the regional partners who want the Trinity Parkway built so desperately, will conclude that building the toll road is 150 times smarter than improving the existing highways in the corridor.

But I do wish that once we get past this toll road debate, we can start addressing another question: Is it really a great idea to keep making it easier for more and more cars to speed along our highways? Will we ever wake up and realize that the sickness wasn't the congestion, but the traffic that causes it in the first place?

It's not, perhaps, that commutes take too long to complete, but because they are simply too long to begin with. That seems to be the message the biggest cities are confronting. Is there any value in our listening to them?



We spend big on DART, too, but as this picture suggests, it has just a trickle of an effect on commuting patters in the land of the highway. (Kyle R. Lee / The Dallas Morning News)

