



State's new plan for I-35E project in Denton County may spare some properties for now

By WENDY HUNDLEY

Staff Writer

whundley@dallasnews.com

Published: 05 June 2012 11:07 PM

April Crocker doesn't have to look far to see proof that the long-awaited Interstate 35E expansion project is making headway.

About a month ago, two houses next to her home on Pinehurst Drive in Lewisville were demolished to make way for a project to widen the busy highway.

Now she and her husband are waiting to hear if a strip along the back of their property will be purchased by the Texas Department of Transportation for the project, which is changing the character of neighborhoods and business areas along the freeway.

"We've had zero communication," said Crocker, echoing the sentiments of other property owners near the highway.

Many have waited years to hear whether they'll be displaced by the \$4.7 billion overhaul intended to relieve gridlock between Dallas and Denton.

Now a new plan for the project may save some homes and businesses from the wrecking ball — at least for now.

"The idea is to work with the existing right of way as much as we can," said TxDOT spokeswoman Cynthia Northrop White, referring to a plan to use tax dollars to hire a private firm to design and build the first phase of the project.

First phase

Construction on the first phase — expected to cost \$1.5 billion — could begin as early as next year and take about five years to complete.

The state has already spent \$59.3 million to acquire 48 parcels along the 28-mile corridor, many of them in southern Denton County.

But the flurry of acquisitions that peaked last year has tapered off, and officials now say they'll need to buy less property than originally anticipated to start the massive reconstruction project.

Originally, officials expected to purchase about 800 parcels. Now only about one-fourth of those parcels — 192 — are needed for the first phase, Northrop White said.

So where does that leave property owners in Lewisville and other areas along the corridor who thought their homes or businesses would be bought up and paved over?

"It's all going to be needed eventually," said Lewisville City Council member Rudy Durham, who served on a local committee that recommended a two-phase construction plan. "But not all the properties are going to be bought at this time."

The first phase of the project would add a new lane in each direction between LBJ Freeway in Dallas and U.S. Highway 380 in Denton.

In addition, two reversible toll lanes would be added to the center of the interstate and a second bridge would be built over Lewisville Lake.

Buying up land

Of the 192 right-of-way parcels to be acquired, 73 are in Lewisville, Northrop White said. She couldn't pinpoint those properties' locations because the first phase of the project will be designed and built at the same time.

"It's hard to be definitive," she said. "We're asking for folks to be patient."

However, TxDOT documents indicate that additional land will be acquired to build five of the six interchanges along the 28-mile route.

In the Lewisville segment, for example, no additional money is allocated for right-of-way acquisition in the 51/2 miles between State Highway 121 and FM407, documents show.

But the Highway 121 interchange, which will cost \$79 million to design and build, comes with \$49 million in right-of-way costs. The \$32 million FM407 interchange lists \$24 million in right-of-way costs.

While transportation officials aren't saying where construction will begin along the 28-mile route, TxDOT has spent \$56 million over the past 18 months buying up 45 properties in Denton County, many in the Lewisville area, records show.

Sale prices vary widely, with a number of parcels selling for more than \$1 million.

The Super 8 Motel in Lewisville sold last year for \$3.6 million — about \$136 per square foot for the building and .6055 acre of land.

TxDOT paid an average of \$36.46 per square foot for the properties purchased since February 2011, according to an analysis of right-of-way deeds.

Differing values

On the north side of Lewisville Lake, Denton County Judge Mary Horn and her husband sold about an acre for almost \$1 million last year. Its appraised value was \$74,242.

Horn denies any conflict of interest, saying the sale price was much higher than the appraised value because the property was zoned commercial, fronted the highway and had access to the lake.

"I don't think I've been treated any different than anyone else," Horn said, pointing out that TxDOT paid more than \$1 million to nearby Hickory Creek Retail for just over a half acre of land.

TxDOT officials emphasize that market value differs from appraised value, and that the price paid for each parcel depends on location, zoning and other factors.

"We hire an independent appraiser to give us the market value," said Northrop White, noting that none of the properties for the I-35E project have been acquired through eminent domain.

On Monday, the Lewisville City Council accepted a donation of portions of four residential lots already purchased by TxDOT. Homes have been razed on three of the lots.

TxDOT needs only the areas of the lots closest to the highway; the city will take over the remaining portions and keep them mowed so they don't become neighborhood eyesores.

One of those four homes was on Pinehurst Drive and had belonged to John McTernan and his wife for almost 16 years. It was appraised at \$204,109 in 2010 and was purchased by TxDOT for \$262,100 in 2011.

McTernan said he had a very positive experience with TxDOT and believes he got a fair price.

While he had mixed feelings about leaving the home, he knew it would eventually be needed for the highway expansion and contacted TxDOT about buying the property.

"We had the house built in 1996 and we were very happy there, except for the noise from the freeway and the A-train," he said. "I think it was time to move on."