

The thicket of TxDOT's Trinity numbers, coming into focus

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The active mind of Jim [Schutze has floated this theory](#):

At some point in the days ahead, *The Dallas Morning News* editorial page will float an argument that the debate between the three council members and the mayor over traffic projections and costs is all sort of six of one, half dozen of the other — too much to follow. Instead, the *News* will offer the following case for the toll road:

The two plans, Pegasus versus Trinity toll road, both have a lot of complicated numbers whirling around them. So in that sense they're sort of equal. We'll never figure it all out, will we? It's like your worst subject in school. Stay away from it!

The toll road is a new road out on new dirt between the flood control levees, so it can be built without any construction mess. And it can charge tolls. So let's do it! Let's just do it!

Actually, he was getting close with his point about the numbers being too much to follow. I'd say they're *realmost* too much to follow, but the boss won't let me quit on

them. So I keep trying to understand the TxDOT figures as well as the Hunt-Griggs-Greyson critique.

Truth be told, I did some of my own math, just like the council members did, because I was wowed by what looked like a whole lot more cars that would move through the Pegasus, under the Pegasus-only scenario, than would move through the Trinity, under the Trinity-only.

There's one problem with my math, and the council members' math, according to TxDOT: We used wrong numbers.

Bear with me here, and be ready to refer to [the TxDOT report to the mayor](#), as posted by Rudy Bush. It's key.

The mayor asked for the TxDOT study in the first place because the council trio claimed in May that the Pegasus could move nearly three times the number of cars than the Trinity and for less money. [Hunt's Web page has a similar, though scaled-back, claim](#) that pulls from the TxDOT report from last month.

Now go to page 10 of the Appendix. Go to the "after construction" table, and see the first line: "Traffic Utilization (Predicted)/(Average Daily Traffic)".

The council members thought — and I thought — that was a statement of the amount of traffic that TxDOT was predicting would use Pegasus in 2030. Seems like a safe assumption, based on the word "predicted."

So I — and they — took that number and subtracted current traffic to come up with the number of additional vehicles put through. Seemed like a lot, and potentially in the Trinity neighborhood (or way beyond, in one of the council critics' scenarios).

Not.

In a series of calls and emailed statements, I'm cautioned by TxDOT that Appendix Page 10, first line, is a statement of *demand* for the highway once it's built. Not a forecast of traffic on the road, but a forecast of traffic that *wants* to use the road.

Here's the money quote from one TxDOT statement:

The information on this line conveys the Trinity SDEIS model's prediction for the year 2030 overall demand for vehicles to use the corridor. It is NOT the number that will actually be able to use the corridor.

I had a conversation with Angela Hunt and forwarded the TxDOT statement to her. She sounded nonplussed and was trying to get her head around it.

Further, TxDOT's report contains three maps showing Trinity only, Pegasus only and build-both scenarios. Those same demand figures show up here, too, on the Pegasus-only page, but here they take the label "projected average traffic" for 2030. Remember, on Page 10 it was "predicted," but here the same number is called "projected." Again, I'm told these are projected *demand* numbers and not a forecast of actual use.

So what's the number of vehicles that would use the road in either scenario? It doesn't exist. And, actually, the mayor didn't ask for it, specifically.

What the mayor did ask for was capacity that would be added to the downtown highway system, another point of contention for the three council members.

Their central complaint is that the mayor wanted a clear side-by-side "matrix" that addressed their assertion that the city should pick one or the other — and that theirs is better and cheaper.

But instead of seeing Trinity alone and Pegasus alone, they say, TxDOT produced grids displaying all the freeway components working together, as most civic leaders have been pushing for. In that sense, they say, it's a sales job.

I don't think that's true, and it took me awhile to get there. And to get there you have to wipe out of your mind the possibility of knowing a traffic forecast. Focus on one thing: The design capacity is the capacity. It has a definition: 22,000 cars per day per lane at a given point. That doesn't change for the Trinity, with or without the Pegasus, and it doesn't change for the Pegasus, with or without the Trinity.

The mayor did ask for each project's design capacity and gain over the capacity today.

He got what he asked for: 132,000 for the Trinity, 93,300 for Pegasus. I don't think it's close. The cost per mile favors the Trinity, too.

As for criticism that those numbers assume the other road is functioning — not. The capacity is the capacity.

The 132,000 happens to be the Trinity's six lanes times 22,000. To arrive at the 93,300 for the Pegasus, go the page "Pegasus system components" subtract line 2 from line 4 for the Canyon, Horseshoe and Lower Stemmons, add up the three differences and divide by 3.

Here's where TxDOT didn't do itself any favors: Its report strayed from the matrix slightly, adding the "combined" column, which pushed some people's buttons. It made the matrix resemble, for suspicious people, a sales job on what many leaders have been pushing for years — both roadways, plus the new lakes and other recreation elements in the floodway.

TxDOT also didn't do itself any favors with its terminology that could easily be misinterpreted. And it wasn't consistent in using it.

This subject is like the Kennedy assassination — someone will ask question that I don't have the answer to, and suddenly things resemble a conspiracy.

Here's one: How can the report assign a letter grade for the level of service if it doesn't have an official forecast of actual use.

Answer: In most of these scenarios you'll a gap between a project's demand and design capacity. That's a guarantee of road congestion. The bigger the gap, the worse the congestion. There may not be an actual traffic forecast. The gap is the predictor.

And in either build-alone scenario, the gaps are huge. Build both and service improves.

The council critics spent a lot of time and energy in their own prepared response to the mayor, and I'm impressed by their commitment. They know this subject matter much better than I do, but I try. Checking both sides feels like a ping-pong game.

(Angela Hunt invited me to read, among other things, Trinity SDEIS Volume I, Part I, Page S 11, Table S1. I have yet to fully digest it.)

Now, as for what the DMN will say in an editorial, I'm still processing material for that time that the boss has me write sentences for publication.

If it were up to me, now, I'd say we back the mayor's acceptance of the report. I'd say we advocate building both projects, the Trinity first, as the region's master plan calls for, and as the one that could be done most easily without the other. As for the steep financial curve, I'd remind the mayor we supported his candidacy as the mayor who could get big things done. No, neither project is funded, but the Trinity has the advantage of being able to be fully tolled.

I'd also point out that, except for Scott Griggs, the entire southern Dallas delegation to council backs the Trinity plan. These supporters argue that dollars will flow with the new freeway access that the Trinity would provide. I buy that. It's not a guarantee, but it's an advantage, an opportunity.

I would be polite and respectful of the three council members, because they care deeply in the city and in their cause. As for their request that the mayor refer the matter to yet more transportation experts, he did the right thing in turning it down.

I'd also acknowledge that the Trinity would be more than a financial feat; it would be somewhat of a first in the U.S. — a major roadway in a major floodway, and post-Katrina, no less. Again, we want big things out of our mayor.

As for the idea that a roadway will defile the Trinity, I'd remind readers that the road would mostly go through what's now a giant ignored grassy plain with an arrow-straight trickle of muddy water in the middle. (Schutze calls it a "waterfront," but let's get real.)

It's mostly a dull, man-made channel that was shoved a good distance west of downtown so the river doesn't mess with anyone during those few times that rain causes it to leave its scrubby banks. The rest of the time the public doesn't even know it's there.

The city should make better use of it and built out the vision of recreation PLUS roadway that voters approved in 1998. Build it. The voters asked for a real waterfront, as opposed to the lagoon that sits there now. Build the lakes and move the river — again. They will co-exist with the road, just like neighbors of all kinds do in an urban setting.