



## ⦿ Inland Port could kick Loop 9 project into high gear, bring heavier trucks

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Local and state officials want to expedite a long-proposed outer ring highway south of Dallas and raise the weight limit on trucks traveling Interstate 45 as they work to kick-start the International Inland Port of Dallas in southern Dallas County.

The port project has moved to the front burner because of an anticipated boost in free trade when the Panama Canal expansion finishes in two years.

"When the new Panama Canal opens up, somebody's going to be a major winner and everybody else is not going to be," Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said last week at the Transportation and Infrastructure Summit in Irving. "We're already behind."

Jenkins and Texas Transportation Department executive director Phil Wilson proposed exploring measures to make the Inland Port a more attractive destination for the increased shipping cargo expected to arrive on the Gulf Coast in fall 2014.

Those measures include allowing heavier trucks on the highway from Dallas to Houston and speeding up work on Loop 9 to ease access to the Inland Port from Interstates 45 and 35E.

The push comes soon after Dallas city leaders renewed their commitment to the port, long touted as a way to spur development in the southern sector, by green-lighting \$23 million for water, wastewater and street infrastructure upgrades.

And the emphasis on the Inland Port improvements — which, officials note, are still in the preliminary stages — could also signal a shift in how officials approach and prioritize transportation projects in North Texas and across the state.

"We are not in the transportation business," Wilson said. "We are in the economic development and people business. We are the artery and lifeline of how we grow our economy in this state."

A key component to attracting freight shipments to Houston's port — and by extension Dallas' Inland Port — could be maximizing how far and fast cargo can travel up into the center of the country.

The truck weight limit in Texas is currently 80,000 pounds, although heavier vehicles can purchase overweight permits. Jenkins wants to increase the limit to 97,000 pounds for trucks with six axles, allowing for a higher volume of shipments.

The proposal would require action from Congress — and likely the state Legislature — which would be no small feat in today's partisan climate. Critics also worry that heavier trucks could create a safety hazard and that they would more quickly tear up roads and bridges.

In the interim, Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas, said Texas has requested to be part of a federal study on the impact of heavier trucks.

"One of the future things we need to look forward to is ... improving the movement of goods with the inland ports and connecting with our border ports," Johnson said at the summit.

Officials also touted how Loop 9 in southern Dallas County could help make the Inland Port more accessible ahead of the Panama Canal expansion, and Jenkins said the state was slated to put its first \$50 million into the highway project later this month.

Both Jenkins and Wilson said the highway had the potential to enliven the mostly undeveloped area around the Inland Port, a project that has been slowed in recent years by the bankruptcy of a major developer and a link to a federal corruption investigation.

"It's opportunity to consider how you accelerate economic growth in that part of the county," Wilson said.

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