

## I-35E widening plans move forward

By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

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Denton County commissioners received word Tuesday that the final environmental hurdle has been cleared for the widening of Interstate 35E.

Since plans for the highway's expansion changed from one massive project to three smaller segments, each one needed to be cleared. All three phases have been cleared, and now officials can move forward in the process.

"This letter indicates that the construction and phasing process will not be negatively impacting the air quality," Commissioner Andy Eads said.

In Tuesday's regular Commissioners Court meeting, Eads read the letter, sent by the Federal Highway Administration and giving approval of the latest environmental analysis from the county.

The project was approved in March when members of the Senate Bill 1420 Committee unanimously voted for the final draft of the highway project.

That committee was established to oversee the use of public-private partnerships to fund the expansion of a 28-mile stretch of I-35E between Denton and Dallas.

The project is expected to add one general-purpose lane in each direction from Interstate 635 to U.S. Highway 380; rebuild high-occupancy lanes into two reversible toll lanes between I-635 and Loop 288; build new southbound frontage roads, general-purpose lanes and managed lanes across Lewisville Lake; and move northbound traffic to the existing lake bridge.

Construction is expected to take four years but will result in better air quality when complete, Eads said.

"Air quality is a real priority for Denton County and all of our regional partners since we have been in a non-attainment area," Eads said. "We're excited that by completing this project we will be improving the air quality in the years to come by improving the mobility north and south."

Denton County transportation consultant John Polster said officials would seek proposals in November from construction firms.

Officials would decide in November or December who will take the reins and begin work in the first or second quarter of 2013.

Polster said he's been surprised by the speed of the proceedings.

"This is actually fast. We're having lots of one-on-one meetings with stakeholders and [the Texas Department of Transportation] to make sure we're not missing anything, but it's wicked fast."

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