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## • Traffic relief in Arlington and Grand Prairie on the way: State Highway 161 opens soon

By TOM BENNING

Staff Writer

[tbenning@dallasnews.com](mailto:tbenning@dallasnews.com)

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Insurance salesman Reco Williams travels State Highway 360 just about every day as he commutes from his home in Arlington to work in Irving.

It's not always a pleasant ride.

"360 is a nightmare," the 34-year-old said last week, eyeing the freeway warily as he filled up his car with gas at the Abram Street Valero station. "Especially in the afternoon, it's pretty much a parking lot."

But there's relief on the way for Williams and others long held captive by the traffic-clogged roads that connect interstates 20 and 30 in the heart of Dallas-Fort Worth. The final 6.5 miles of State Highway 161, a toll road that will now stretch through Grand Prairie, is almost finished.

And with most of the road set to open in mid-October — a bit ahead of schedule — local officials hope that the new corridor will not only ease congestion, but also spur economic development in some of the rare open space that's left in region's sprawling central suburbs.

"It's going to be the biggest economic impact we've had since I've been mayor for 20 years," said Grand Prairie Mayor Charles England. "No question."

The \$535 million project, an extension of the Bush Turnpike that loops all the way to Rowlett, has long been planned to provide another major north-south road between State Highway 360 and the combination of Spur 408 and Loop 12.

The expansion's first part, from State Highway 183 to just short of I-30, opened in 2009, and the last portion was originally scheduled for completion before the end of the year. But hot, dry weather allowed crews to accelerate the timeline to the early fall unveiling.

Come mid-October, all main lanes of the North Texas Tollway Authority road will be open. The same goes for most of the free frontage roads, save for the stretch that crosses railroad tracks between Main and Jefferson streets in Grand Prairie.

Most of the direct connectors between 161 and I-30 will open next month, except for southbound 161 to the interstate's eastbound lanes and the ramps from westbound I-30 to either direction of the toll road.

England and other Grand Prairie officials are counting on the traffic to attract big box stores and other retail development, particularly around I-20. And the mayor said his phone has already been busy with calls from interested groups.

There's also hope it will bring additional business to stores in downtown Grand Prairie and other merchants, such as the newly opened Paragon Outlets that sits along I-20 between highways 360 and 161.

"This is just going to connect us more to North Dallas and that luxury shopper that's available there," said Rebecca Galuppo, the outlet mall's assistant general manager.

In the meantime, officials predict the new road will provide motorists a nearby alternative to State Highway 360, which sees an average 171,000 cars a day near Abram Street and even more during Texas Rangers and Dallas Cowboys games.

NTTA says the toll rates will be the same as throughout its system — an average 15.3 cents per mile. At that rate, it will cost about \$1.75 to drive from I-20 to 183.

And while not everyone, such as Arlington diesel mechanic Tommy Patterson, is thrilled at the prospect of paying a fee to use the 161 extension, he and other drivers said they were ready for anything to free up the area's roadways.

"I can't see myself paying taxes and tolls," he said. "I won't use it, but I hope it helps."

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