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Work starting on Dallas-to-Denton I-35E expansion

Get ready for more gridlock.

Officials broke ground Thursday on the first phase of the massive Interstate 35E expansion project that has been in the planning stages for 15 years.

The widening project will stretch from LBJ Freeway in Dallas to U.S. Highway 380 in Denton.

It will add more free lanes and incorporate reversible toll lanes that will have fluctuating prices, depending on the type of vehicle and traffic conditions.

The project includes rebuilding the Belt Line interchange and adding a second bridge over Lewisville Lake to handle southbound traffic.

Although it's called the 35Express Project, the name might seem a bit ill-chosen to motorists traveling the 28-mile construction route over the next three years.

Officials acknowledge that the project will create headaches for commuters. But they say that I-35E is one of the most congested highways in the nation and that the area's continued growth would only add to traffic woes without the expansion.

To expedite the project, construction will be underway on some parts of the highway while others are being designed. This design-build process will cut the construction time in half, Texas Transportation Commissioner Jeff Austin III told the crowd at the groundbreaking.

In addition, penalties are to be assessed if the contractor fails to meet deadlines.

Motorists can sign up at 35express.org to get construction updates.

When the first phase is completed by 2017, officials promise a smoother commute and relief from rush-hour jams.

The reconstructed highway will save motorists 1.7 million hours in travel time each year, according to the Texas A&M Transportation Institute.

"Be patient, but know there's a better day ahead," Texas Transportation Commissioner Victor Vandergriff said.

Here are some facts about the highway and the project from the Texas Department of Transportation and the project's contractor, AGL Constructors:

History and growth: I-35E was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s. More than 200,000 vehicles travel each day along the Dallas-Denton stretch of the highway. Parts of the highway are on TxDOT's list of the state's 100 most congested roadways.

Expansion plans: In 1998, a major study began on expansion of the highway. An environmental assessment began in 2003. In 2009, the Federal Highway Administration approved the project's express-lane demonstration program. Last year, a finance committee set up for the project determined that Phase 1 should be a design-build project with public financing and could incorporate managed lanes. In December, the contract for the project was awarded to AGL Constructors, made up of Archer Western Granite and LANE Constructors

Funding: The \$4.8 billion project is being built in two phases. Officials secured \$1.4 billion for the first phase through a combination of federal and state and local resources, including State Highway 121 regional toll funds. The second phase will be done when funding becomes available.

Scope: The 28-mile project extends through eight cities and two counties. About 900 jobs will be created by the public-private project and related services. The dirt moved for the project — more than 1.1 million cubic yards excavated and more than 1.2 million cubic yards embanked — would fill about half of AT&T Stadium. The project will use more than 39,700 tons of reinforcing steel. More than 400,000 cubic yards of concrete will be poured.