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Outer Loop Road might be first step in Collin's future growth

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The two-lane concrete roadway, recently poured and deeply textured, runs for 4.6 miles through the rolling open land between Melissa and Anna in far northern Collin County.

Officials think of it as their future.

This section of the Outer Loop Road — locals call it Foster Crossing or County Road 366 — is the first part of what planners envisioned as a network of highways encircling Dallas-Fort Worth.

But as it stands, this new bit of road offers no hint of what it might eventually be.

It connects State Highway 121 on the east and U.S. 75-Central Expressway on the west, and in the short term, officials hope it will divert some traffic from 121. The project cost more than \$21 million — including \$9.3 million for right-of-way acquisition, \$8.9 million for construction and more than \$2 million for engineering, along with some other costs.

Commuters heading to McKinney, Plano and beyond will have to follow access roads for almost a mile to enter or exit Central. And the Outer Loop Road sits almost 43 miles from downtown Dallas.

"I have to tell you there will be some naysayers," Collin County Judge Keith Self said at a ribbon-cutting ceremony Monday morning. "Why would you build a road out in the middle of nowhere?"

"But this is a great day," Self said, "and Collin County is going to continue to grow in the coming years."

U.S. Rep. Sam Johnson, who represents portions of Collin and Dallas counties, said getting new roads built has been a challenge for state and federal agencies, even as Collin's population has soared.

"I'm not surprised the county did it," Johnson said. "That's looking ahead with foresight. We're bringing businesses to Texas like mad, and these roads are all a part of it."

But at this point, it appears unlikely that Collin's Outer Loop Road will ever be part of one huge regional ring. A combination of factors — demographic shifts, funding shortages from the gasoline tax, and viability of new toll roads — forced transportation planners to chop the regional concept into two pieces and either abandon the rest or push it decades into the future.

The two that made the cut in the North Central Texas Council of Governments' Mobility 2035 plan: Collin County's portion of the loop, and Loop 9 in southern Dallas County.

"In the 2010 census, we noticed a fairly sizable shift in demographics, a shift in where people were choosing to live," said Tom Shelton, a senior program manager with the Council of Governments. "They were coming back to the inner core, so less traffic demand was expected in those outer reaches."

But Collin County is still seeing dramatic growth, Shelton said, and remains a part of Mobility 2035. Planners aren't certain what the second phase of Collin's project should be, though.

County officials pushed on with this initial 4.6-mile stretch of the Outer Loop in large part to acquire right of way for the time when business and residential growth resume their almost manic pace.

It provided the opportunity to buy a right of way 500 feet wide and building a service road for what the county envisions as a six-or-more-lane highway running from Interstate 30 near the Rockwall County line and then arcing across Collin to the Denton County line.

Self said he considers the next likely phase of construction between an extended Dallas North Tollway and Preston Road in the Celina area.

"The Dallas North Tollway is an economic engine," Self said. "And we're already seeing some of our smaller cities returning to triple-digit permitting growth, barring what people are calling 'the coming recession.'

"So it all depends on the growth, and then the money to build," he said.

Money, though, is in short supply. State transportation officials say demands on the Texas highway system already outpace available revenue for replacing and repairing existing roads, let alone building new ones.

"The traditional source of public funding for roads comes from the gasoline tax," Shelton said. "But with more people settling closer in, and with more fuel-efficient cars, we have less money to work with."

Tolls have driven much of the recent road expansion in the Dallas area, including the Sam Rayburn Tollway and the Bush Turnpike. The rapid expansion has left the North Texas Tollway Authority with a total debt of almost \$9 billion. The demographic shift away from distant suburbs means the planned loop roads won't carry enough traffic to be toll-viable, Shelton said.

In southern Dallas County, the scaled-back Loop 9 project is planned to serve Dallas' Inland Port rail center with an east-west connection between Interstates 35 and 45 and beyond. Collin County officials will carefully watch what happens with this first phase of the loop project there.

"Loop 9 really hinges on funding," Shelton said. "But I think our office and TxDOT are working closely with Dallas County to bring some improvement sooner than later.

"As for Collin, I'm not sure any of us know what the next phase will be," he said. "I think they want to see how successful this first phase will be."