



Proponents say toll road will spur growth in rural Collin, Hunt counties, but some remain doubtful

4 5 0 [Share](#) 0 5 AA

By MICHAEL E. YOUNG

Staff Writer

myoung@dallasnews.com

Published: 02 February 2013 10:29 PM

On the map, it's a long, thin line slicing neatly through the narrow neck of land between Lake Lavon and Lake Ray Hubbard, connecting Greenville in Hunt County to Lavon in Collin County and ultimately, perhaps, to the Bush Turnpike and all of Dallas-Fort Worth.

Proponents of this private toll road, planned for an abandoned rail right of way controlled by a public agency, say it will relieve traffic pressures on Interstate 30, allow easy commutes to job centers in Greenville and the Plano-Richardson area, and bring an economic boost to towns such as Commerce and Greenville that have taken major hits over the last few years.

But in the quiet country pockets near Caddo Mills, in the Clinton community, that line is an open wound, a four-lane slab of concrete that will bring noise, pollution and congestion to the idyllic place they call home.

Rosie Melott, who was born and raised in the Clinton area, about seven miles southwest of Greenville, is a cheerful, gracious woman. But she wants no part of a toll road rolling through her yard.

"When we heard about this, I couldn't believe that Greenville needed a toll road, or Lavon or Josephine or Nevada," she said, ticking off the towns along the right of way. "My first thought is 'Who's going to drive on it?' You already have [U.S.] 380, you have Highway 78, you have Highway 6, you have I-30.

"I'll be honest. I call it the toll road to nowhere," Melott said.

But John N. Crew, president of Dallas-based Public Werks Inc. and the Texas Turnpike Corp., which first pitched the toll road idea, takes a much different view.

"You'd have to say most of the reticence has been in the Clinton community," Crew said. "There's been some new construction there, people have moved in over the last three to five years, and they're concerned.

"But from Greenville and Commerce and other points east, those counties see this as a lifeline," he said.

In the halls of government in Hunt County, in the county seat of Greenville and in Commerce, home to a campus of Texas A&M, it's easy to look west toward Collin County and its staggering growth over the last couple of decades and wonder, why not us?

Greenville's population has increased only modestly over the last four decades, from 22,043 in 1970 to 25,557 in 2010. One of its major employers, Newell-Rubbermaid, closed last summer, taking almost 500 full-time jobs.

And, if anything, things are worse in Commerce, which has lost \$40 million from its tax base since 2008, largely because of business closings, according to Hunt County Chief Appraiser Brent South.

But McKinney, the Collin County seat just up the road on U.S. 380, grew by a staggering 143 percent between 2000 and 2010. Its median household income, \$74,784, doubles Greenville's \$37,471 and towers over Commerce's \$27,829.

It's no wonder that Hunt County Judge John Horn is an unabashed supporter of the toll road idea.

"I think the opportunity it brings for the eastern part of the [North Texas] region is very positive," he said, "and not just for Hunt County, but with collateral benefits for the counties east of us."

"There are some negatives, naturally. Everybody was mindful of the fact that folks living along this corridor would have concerns," Horn said. "I can't think of any major project like this that didn't have the same challenges — I-20, I-30, the George Bush Turnpike — all had concerns.

"But things change, times change and we're in a metropolitan area that continues to grow at enormous rates, and we have to find ways to accommodate that," he said.

Proponents tick off a number of reasons it is a good idea — anticipated growth in the Dallas-Fort Worth region, lack of funding from public sources to build roads or expand existing ones, and most critically, trying to anticipate needs before it's impossible to catch up.

"We're going to be 10.5 million people in this region," said Michael Morris, director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, which coordinates regional planning over 16 counties. "When I came here in the late '70s, early '80s, you'd have this perception that Greenville is like a two-day drive. We made improvements to I-30, and now Greenville feels a lot closer."

Moving forward

The genesis of the toll road project grew from Public Werks' involvement in major infrastructure projects — transportation, water, sewer and power, Crew said.

"We got a contract with DART [Dallas Area Rapid Transit] to help with things on the Cotton Belt [railroad] right of way," he said.

K. Neal Barker, part of the Public Werks team on that project, learned of a water pipeline that followed the old railroad right of way through Collin and Hunt counties in December 2011, and Crew and his staff started studying maps.

The abandoned right of way, most of it 100 feet wide, fell under the jurisdiction of the Northeast Texas Rural Rail Transportation District, or NETEX.

Eminent domain

Two decades earlier, Crew was involved in the formation of the Texas Turnpike Corp., shortly before the Texas Legislature stopped allowing private toll road companies. But the Texas Turnpike Corp. was grandfathered in and retained the right of eminent domain — the ability to take private property for public use.

"We know how sensitive eminent domain is, and we would very much not want to use it except in those cases where someone is trying to take advantage of the system," Crew said. "We plan on buying what we need. But until we get the exact alignment, we don't know what we'll need."

Though Crew and his staff have held meetings public and private across Collin and Hunt counties, few details are firmly set. The proposal needs to win a spot on the regional transportation plan first, and then comes the fine tuning.

The first major step came in January, with a lease agreement for the Cotton Belt rail corridor. While NETEX will hold at least 50 feet of the right of way for future rail use, its board gave Public Werks a lease to the other 50 feet in a tight 6-5 vote.

Jason Lee Davis, a member of the NETEX board, was one of those who voted against the lease, though he said the toll road "sounds like a fantastic deal that would solve a lot of problems."

His concern, he said, was in the lease itself.

"I didn't think that adequately protects the interest of NETEX and restoring rail in that corridor," Davis said.

Away from growth

The planned four-lane, limited access toll road will require considerably more land than the NETEX corridor provides, though, and that's led to residents' concerns, some accusations and a lot of hard feelings.

Brenda Short and her family bought 32 acres in the Clinton area last year, a mix of fields and woods, to build their home.

"We knew the right of way existed — we talked with our Realtor, and they were very upfront," Short said. "There had been talk of commuter rail and freight, things of that nature, and we decided we'd be OK with commuter rail."

"But we had no idea someone might want to take an extra 200 feet from the back of our property," she said.

Short learned of the proposed toll road project in mid-December, after Public Werks met with Greenville city officials and received their support. She started to talk with neighbors and few had even heard of the plan. So, she sent 180 letters to residents, and created a Facebook page and a website, notollroad.com.

Collin County Commissioner Cheryl Williams, who serves on the NETEX board and voted against the rail corridor lease, said many of her constituents in Nevada and Josephine want to keep things the way they are.

"What I've heard over and over from rural residents is 'We've moved here to get away from the urban and suburban growth.' I'm not going to ignore their desires," she said.

Near Caddo Mills, in the Clinton community, word spreads neighbor to neighbor. Melott imagines the home she and her husband built for their retirement years bulldozed for an exit ramp.

"They'll take my home," she said, "and I just can't go out and buy another home like this."

Nearby, the Shorts' land sits empty, their dream on hold.

"We don't feel real hopeful right now," Short said, "but we're still doing our best to stop it."



Gay-rights leaders present 1.4 million signatures urging Boy Scouts to lift ban



Dallas preparing to issue \$12.8M grant to secure another parking garage for Victory Park



Live chat: SportsDay's Rick Gosselin talks Cowboys, Super Bowl and more



The best and worst Super Bowl commercials, including the worst kiss on television

Comments

To post a comment, log into your chosen social network and then add your comment below. Your comments are subject to our [Terms of Service](#) and the privacy policy and terms of service of your social network. If you do not want to comment with a social network, please consider writing a [letter to the editor](#).



Login to post a comment

Login

Post

5 Comments

[RSS](#) | [Subscribe](#)



TexasTruBlu 22 hours ago

Yep, that's what we need. Another tollway. Never mind that we pay taxes to the Fed and state for every gallon of gas to fund roads. Never mind that we are stuck paying for countless bond issues for road that get built decades after they are needed. My last NTTA bill was over \$200 a month and we don't even commute. People are paying a tax for which they get no credit on their income taxes.

Reply

0



John Tyler 1 day ago

John Crew complains that Greenville has not grown like McKinney. Trust me, that is NOT a bad thing. With growth comes huge tax cash that local government can swim in. With growth comes huge corruption and if anyone was to seriously audit McKinney's books right now, you'd see exactly how much corruption is going on at city hall. From the mayor, to his puppet city manager to the city manager's puppet police chief, to the brother-in-law of the police chief on down to the assistants all getting huge pay raises, if anything, Greenville does not want to become another McKinney. No city does.

Reply

[2 replies](#)

0



TexasTruBlu 22 hours ago

Collin County was warned over 20 years ago that the planned growth would strip water resources. They have yet to secure additional water resources and frankly, development will stall at some point due to that critical oversight. There's alot to be said for having a smaller town that isn't reliant on the success or failure of the nearest megacity.

Reply

0



Bill 20 hours ago

Is it true the new city manager over in Mckinney has used over a cool million in taxpayer funds to fire and payoff employees so he could hire his own personal friends and pay them more than the previous person was paid for the same job? That's what I heard anyway. Yeah, I think I like small hometowns better, but there' bad people everywhere I guess.

Reply

0



Rodriguez Rodriguez 1 day ago

I've noticed a handful of typos on this article. It makes me wonder if yall proofread or edit before publishing.

Besides that, I don't think there should be a toll road built along the rail right-of-way. The district should give the rail to the Cotton Belt project that will not displace families or create an environment hazard, which is what a toll road will do.

Also, I avoid toll roads as much as I could. It wasn't very clear why they want to build this toll road, but if they build it I will never ride on it. Which means I won't be spending mytax dollars on local businesses if the best way to get there is through a toll road.

Reply

0

