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NTTA wants to quiet Rowlett residents' complaints about Bush Turnpike noise

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By TOM BENNING

Staff Writer

tbenning@dallasnews.com

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A busy highway's din has replaced quiet lakeside life for scores of Rowlett residents who live along a two-mile stretch of the Bush Turnpike's eastern extension, which opened in December 2011.

And while the North Texas Tollway Authority followed all rules in addressing the highway noise — most notably, building sound walls along that stretch's service roads — the NTTA is taking the unusual step of seeking further aid for residents between Miller Road and Lake Ray Hubbard.

Facing complaints from neighbors — even after the agency agreed in November to add landscaping to create a natural screen — NTTA's board directed staff last week to study ideas about how to “effectively and significantly” reduce the clamor.

“What we will do, then, is ask our staff to figure out a strategy on how to appropriately address this and what can be done about it,” said Kenneth Barr, board chairman.

“Not *whether* there's a problem or not, but what can be done about it.”

Residents voicing concerns about highway noise are nothing new. Elizabeth Mow, NTTA's assistant executive director of infrastructure, said the agency gets at least one such complaint each week from somewhere in the system.

But given that there are detailed procedures to address traffic noise — and that whatever action was required probably took place years before — the conversation usually stops there. Indeed, NTTA's staff recommended last week that nothing further be done along the Bush Turnpike stretch.

Nonetheless, most on the board expressed an interest in helping the 600 families potentially affected. At the same time, however, several members cautioned against setting a precedent of going beyond federal and state requirements.

“Anything we move forward on needs to be labeled as a demonstration type of project — not, for the lack of a better word, a capitulation,” board member Michael Nowels said.

The Bush Turnpike's eastern extension — a 10-mile stretch from State Highway 78 in Garland, through Sachse and Rowlett, to Interstate 30 — has been part of regional transportation plans since at least the 1960s.

Neighborhoods were built in the area with full knowledge that cars and trucks would someday drive through what's been known as the Loop 9/State Highway 190 path. And for many years, residents enjoyed the idle corridor, which amounted to an undeveloped greenway.

But as NTTA ramped up planning for its \$958 million Bush Turnpike expansion, the road became more than just a line on a map.

In keeping with established guidelines, an environmental analysis was used to determine whether sound walls were needed. Based on projections of future noise, walls were considered if noise levels approached or exceeded 67 decibels — about the sound of a vacuum cleaner — or if there was a 10-decibel increase.

The resulting sound walls had to reduce noise by five decibels, but they also had to cost less than \$25,000 per benefiting property. Because conditions aren't the same everywhere along the road, different areas received different kinds of noise abatements.

NTTA's first study, in 2004, recommended a 10-foot sound wall along the frontage roads for the two-mile stretch north of Lake Ray Hubbard. A re-analysis in 2008 reduced the wall's height to 8 feet, but no other changes to the road's design or path were made.

The plans, including the changes, were presented at public meetings and mailed to neighborhood residents, NTTA officials said. And residents whose properties were adjacent to the toll road were given the chance to vote on the sound wall proposals.

But after the road opened in late 2011, residents along that two-mile stretch said the clamor was louder than what they'd imagined or what had been projected.

They said their area's abatements were ineffective, given that the elevated tollway there is higher than the sound walls. Instead of being built outside the service roads, they said, the walls should have been put up along the main lanes, as in other parts of the extension.

The nonstop racket of 18-wheelers, cars and motorcycles has disrupted people's lives, one resident, Melissa Bengé, said at last week's NTTA board meeting. After she related a lengthy series of anecdotes from her neighbors, one board member gently suggested that she submit the rest of the accounts in writing.

“I know it's kind of monotonous and not easy to listen to,” Bengé replied. “That's how I feel about the constant tollway noise, also.”

Residents have asked NTTA to intervene, possibly spending \$11.5 million to construct additional sound walls along the tollway's main lanes. The existing sound walls in that stretch, by comparison, cost about \$1.4 million in 2008.

NTTA had resisted such overtures, arguing that all requirements were met and that the existing sound walls achieved the goal of reducing noise by five decibels. But there's been acknowledgement in recent months that the highway's opening put residents in a tough spot.

NTTA's board agreed in November to spend \$315,000 on landscaping to create a visual buffer. And with residents still pushing for more — with backing from state Sen. John Carona and Dallas County Commissioner Mike Cantrell — the board agreed last week to look at other options.

"The board would like to see this move aggressively, sooner rather than later," Barr said. "This is a major concern, and we want something done."

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