



Traffic relief could be coming sooner than expected for State Highway 161 stretch in Irving

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Traffic relief could be on the way sooner than expected for the congested three-mile stretch of State Highway 161 just north of State Highway 183 in Irving.

The unusual corridor — a chunk of state-maintained freeway stuck between two pieces of the North Texas Tollway Authority’s Bush Tumpike — will be part of a Texas Department of Transportation pilot plan to reduce congestion.

Within six to 12 months, the shoulders on that four-lane stretch, between State Highway 183 and Belt Line Road, will be converted to traffic lanes during peak periods. That will make the road six lanes wide at rush hour, eliminating a bottleneck between the six-lane segments of toll road.

Since that shift will eliminate a place for disabled vehicles to pull over, the effort will feature dynamic messaging signs, highway traffic cameras and a fleet of rapid-response tow trucks, said Michael Morris, transportation director at the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

“We’re trying to come up with interim solutions that have a huge impact,” said Morris, who added that the idea will also be tested in Houston.

The odd highway configuration, dubbed the “three-mile island” by some officials, came about after the state-maintained portion opened in 1994. With freeway money running short — and planners wanting to expedite the project — tolls became the focus for the rest of the planned road.

The first stretch of the Bush Tumpike opened in 1998. And with the most recent addition in October, extending the road south to Interstate 20, the highway now spans Grand Prairie to Rowlett.

The State Highway 161 segment in Irving isn’t, by any means, the worst traffic spot in North Texas. But it still sees more than 85,000 vehicles per day. And since it’s a relatively short stretch that’s constricting more free-flowing roads, it’s an appealing target for congestion mitigation.

Eventually, planners hope to build additional lanes to better integrate the road with the Bush Tumpike and provide more permanent relief. The trick, however, is that state law requires that the highway’s free lanes must remain free.

So even though there are toll roads on both ends, the expansion is expected to involve managed toll lanes similar to those being built on LBJ Freeway and other area highways.

Officials hope the upcoming pilot effort can ease the traffic crunch in the short term. Traffic speeds will be monitored to determine whether it’s actually making a difference.

If the test proves successful, TxDOT executive director Phil Wilson said it could be implemented on highways statewide.

“You’re saying to the driving public, ‘How can we be smarter each and every day and mitigate an accident and create a safer solution in the interim until we have some new capacity?’” Wilson said.

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