

TxDOT moves to increase several highway speed limits



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North Texas commuters, especially those in suburbs and rural areas, could soon be driving a little bit faster to get home.

The Texas Department of Transportation hopes to raise the speed limit on scores of highways by 5 mph. And that's just one component of a complex regional transportation plan aimed at improving commutes — and air quality.

Major suburban routes proposed to see higher limits include Central Expressway through Richardson and Collin County, Interstate 30 from LBJ Freeway to Rockwall, Interstate 35E from LBJ to Denton and Interstate 20 from State Highway 360 to U.S. Highway 175.

I-20 would see the higher 70-mph limit. The others would rise from 60 to 65 mph.

The multimillion-dollar plan involves multiple agencies and cities. It could also fix the timing of traffic signals throughout Dallas-Fort Worth and restrict 18-wheelers from the passing lanes of more area highways.

It could take more than a year for all of the proposed changes to roll out. But the first hurdle could be cleared Thursday. That's when the Regional Transportation Council is slated to vote on funding for several of the initiatives.

"There's been a lot of moving elements," said Chris Klaus, a senior program manager at the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

NCTCOG is an umbrella entity that includes the RTC. It oversees regional transportation policy and handles local clean-air strategy.

The entity won't directly clear the way for TxDOT to raise limits. Increasing speed on highways will slightly raise the amount of ozone-forming pollutants cars emit. Because of that, environmental agencies will require TxDOT to offset those amounts in other ways before they green-light increased limits.

North Texas' levels of ozone, a damaging pollutant, are higher than the EPA's national health standard. Vehicles are the area's biggest source of nitrogen oxides, which cause ozone-forming pollutions.

The RTC's plans to fund efforts that cut car emissions, like retiming traffic lights, is meant to help TxDOT receive environmental clearance.

Outside the oval

Nearly all of the highway corridors that could see higher speed limits lie outside what RTC calls the "central urban area." That's an oval-like portion of the region that encompasses downtown Dallas and Fort Worth and large swaths of suburbs in between.

TxDOT officials said highway corridors within that core are more congested and feature more interchanges and ramps that require lower speeds.

"Less congestion and more space on the road means we can safely increase driving speeds without hurting the environment and without jeopardizing the safety of our motorists," said Ryan LaFontaine, a TxDOT spokesman.

But one key corridor within the urban core that could see an increased limit is State Highway 360 in Arlington. The speed limit would rise from 60 to 65 mph there.

Police officials in Arlington and Plano, which would both be affected by the speed increases, declined to comment.

Retiming lights

TxDOT's plan also includes most major highway corridors in outlying areas, like Interstate 35W in Johnson County and Interstate 45 in Ellis County. Speed limits there would rise to 70 mph.

The limits on the highways were set in 2001. Klaus said they were set based on old emission models set by the Environmental Protection Agency. He said new formulas reveal that raising the speed limits won't increase harmful pollutants as much as previously thought.

"The models are totally different today," Klaus said.

Because suburbs and rural areas will benefit from increased speed limits, part of the traffic light retiming will be focused on inner-ring cities.

Much of that work will be done on frontage roads along highways within the urban core, like Interstate 30 between Dallas and Fort Worth. Klaus said the agencies want to develop a system that gives preference to frontage-road drivers during rush hour and inclement weather events.

But RTC will also work with area cities to retime traffic lights on their major streets. He said it's not an expensive endeavor, but one that needs to be done every few years as population and development alter traffic.

TxDOT has already identified highways where it wants to add lane restrictions for 18-wheelers. It wasn't clear Wednesday which of those corridors would be funded by Thursday's vote.

The RTC meets at 1 p.m. at NCTCOG headquarters, 616 Six Flags Drive in Arlington.

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I think it's 80 already on 75 in Collin county. The only thing slowing it down is the construction in McKinney.