

# Elevated thinking on future of Interstate 345



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By BRANDON FORMBY

Transportation Writer

[bformby@dallasnews.com](mailto:bformby@dallasnews.com)

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Interstate 345 gets hundreds of thousands of people into, out of and around downtown Dallas every week. Yet the 1.4-mile connector has never had a high profile in North Texas mobility.

That's changing fast.

A grassroots group led by an urban planner wants to tear down the aging, raised highway that forms downtown's eastern border. They want to make room for a real estate renaissance on the land between downtown and Deep Ellum.

"There's a demographic shift going on that people want walkability again," said Patrick Kennedy, who co-founded the organization A New Dallas.

That group's website is gathering petition signatures in support of demolition. The idea is also gaining some ground with city leaders. Mayor Mike Rawlings is slated to meet with the Texas Department of Transportation about the idea next month. He wants the agency to study the matter.

TxDOT is open to a study, but it says vetting the effects of a teardown could cost \$10 million and take a decade. Meanwhile, the agency is embarking on a \$100 million renovation of I-345. The highway is used to make more than 200,000 trips each weekday, according to a 2013 analysis.

"Those traffic counts are there and they are our customers," said Tony Hartzel, a TxDOT spokesman. "They show there is a need, and we have to address that need as best we can."

## Second look

Anyone who drives that stretch of highway — or any of the four freeways it connects with — probably favors a methodical look at what demolition would do to traffic. But transportation gurus and urban planners, like Kennedy, say the way transportation departments look at mobility today is outdated.

Experts say people and transportation departments don't grasp that much of what drives highway demand is the existence of highways in the first place. They say mindsets left over from an era of explosive highway expansion enables a transportation system that is detrimental to urban quality of life — and expensive to taxpayers.

"That freeway probably made sense when it was built, but does it make sense now?" said Roger Millar, an engineer and vice president of Smart Growth America. "What's going to give Dallas the bigger bang for its buck — preserving that facility or taking that space and doing something with it?"

The situation makes I-345 the local battleground for an emerging national debate about how transportation should be approached in the 21st century.

"Ultimately, this is a political and economic discussion more than it is engineering," Kennedy said.

## Highway expansion

I-345 opened in 1974, in the middle of a decades-long period of unprecedented development growth in America. In North Texas, inner-ring bedroom communities like Irving, Mesquite and Richardson sprouted up.

I-345 helped make it easier for people living in these cities to get to the workplace hub that was downtown. The highway directly connected to Interstates 45 and 75, both of which are north-south corridors. It interchanged with Interstate 30 and Woodall Rodgers, which provide east-west access.

City traffic engineers embraced the idea that the faster you could get people into the city in the morning and out of it in the evening, the better. The region sprawled farther out. Former farm towns like Plano grew bigger than their inner-ring counterparts.

The highways that got people from the suburbs to downtown attracted outdoor strip shopping centers and large indoor malls that required expansive parking lots. Stores and residents fled downtown for the suburbs.

Outlying development drove demand for access. Wider highways made access easier, which drove more demand for farther-out development. It turned into a cycle that began to feed itself, some experts say.

"It's not that what we did was wrong," Millar said of this period of American highway expansion. "It was appropriate for the time. The times are changing."

### **Staying close**

Christopher B. Leinberger is chair of the Real Estate Center at George Washington University's School of Business. He said decades of highway construction have created an infrastructure that forces Americans to demand more freeways.

"You only have one option: You must drive," he said.

But many social and economic factors are changing how people want to get around. Downtown Dallas no longer has a monopoly on being a workplace hub. Suburbs like Irving and Plano have put together enviable clusters of large corporations that want to be close to where their workforce lives.

Even in car-centric Dallas, light rail trains have become a go-to option for suburban commuters wanting to avoid highway traffic. Since 1996, Dallas Area Rapid Transit has built an 85-mile, 61-station network throughout its 13-city area.

Technology has decreased the need to travel for meetings — or even to the office. And younger employees, even if they do work in the urban core, have waved off long commutes to the suburbs as a fact of life. They'd rather live in or near the urban core.

In 1996, 200 people lived in downtown Dallas. Today, more than 8,000 people do. Residential units are at 94 percent occupancy and thousands more units are in the works or have been announced.

"There is a cultural shift trying to occur and I think eventually it will, no matter what," Kennedy said.

### **Surface street**

Nationally, motorists last year drove fewer miles per person than they did in 1996. And last year, public transit use hit a 57-year high. But Kennedy said TxDOT is still stuck in the mindset from the highway expansion era that demand will continue rising and road capacity is its only solution.

"I can guarantee you that if we don't do something about it, we can continue this kind of sprawling disarray and disinvestment," he said.

Kennedy believes a major surface street should replace I-345. He, Leinberger and Millar see that as a viable replacement artery for the tens of thousands of drivers who use I-345 to get into and out of downtown. The surface street's traffic would attract the kind of mixed-use developments of residences, offices and retail that are becoming more popular than suburban strip malls.

"Think about all the great stuff happening in Uptown," Leinberger said. "It doesn't want to be next to a freeway. It wants to be next to a secondary street."

### **Demand**

Experts say transportation departments' true goal is to spur economic development. A highway like I-345 not only prevents that, they say, but also serves to feed the demand transportation departments say they're trying to quell.

"You're not solving the problem, you're accommodating it," Millar said.

Hartzel, the TxDOT spokesman, said there's no definitive answer on how much demand a highway's existence creates.

“That’s an ongoing debate,” he said.

### Renovation

TxDOT can’t ignore the tens of thousands of people who use I-345 to get to other highways or through downtown.

“There is still a demand to use those roadways,” Hartzel said. “We’re dealing with the demand that’s there.”

A key in determining where those motorists likely would go is figuring out where they are coming from and where they are heading already. That would give a more nuanced understanding of how I-345 is used than mere traffic counts. The Regional Transportation Council said last week that it is preparing such an analysis.

Hartzel said the planned \$100 million I-345 renovation wouldn’t take a possible teardown off the table. He said the study would look at traffic on I-345, capacity of other highways, how city streets could be used as thoroughfares and how other neighborhoods would be affected by a change in access to the rest of the region.

“It’s not a bad thing to go through the process,” Hartzel said. “You need to be able to engage everyone.”

While Kennedy believes the decadelong projection is a stalling tactic, he’s still glad that the idea is at least gaining some traction.

“It’s about the city having an honest and open debate about what’s best for the city,” he said. “We’re getting there.”

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218 Comments

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 **vc25AEMP** 1 day ago  
 Once again, I wonder how many people who rail against this idea live in Dallas proper and how many live in the exurbs. I've yet to meet a citizen of the impacted Dallas neighborhoods who isn't at least intrigued by the idea. They may not be completely sold on it, but they're intrigued.

Meanwhile everyone I know who is vehemently against this lives in West Dallas, Plano, Frisco, Allen, McKinney, etc. Forgive me if I have very little care for what people from those places think.

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 **Steve** 23 hours ago  
 The people who for whatever reason chose to live near and around I345 chose so knowing there was a highway there. If now they don't like it then they should move!!

Like Reply Share 6 replies 6 14

 **Anonymous** 22 hours ago  
 You must think god created the highway then, because you sound as if the highway was there before the beninning of time.

Like Reply Share 1 reply 11 3

 **mdunlap1** 15 hours ago  
 Yep. Some people appear to believe the highway has been there hundreds of years. It's actually very new relative to the life of Dallas. And central Dallas was far better off in many ways before it was built.

Previous generations sometimes leave their descendants with huge errors. Urban highways are a colossal error the Greatest and Lost Generations left ours.