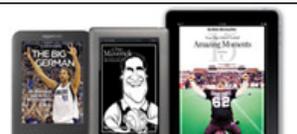


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Proposed Collin-Hunt toll road faces new challenges

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By MICHAEL E. YOUNG

Staff Writer

myoung@dallasnews.com

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Proponents of a limited-access toll road on an abandoned rail right-of-way that would link Wylie in Collin County with Greenville in Hunt County have hit a couple of bumps.

The Regional Transportation Council recently tweaked its proposed Mobility 2035 amendment. Instead of calling for the toll road, it calls for a study of a project now called "Blacklands Corridor" instead of "Blacklands Toll Road."

And the North Texas Tollway Authority has declined to waive its "primacy" in building and operating toll roads in Dallas-Fort Worth for this project proposed by Public Werks/Texas Turnpike Corp., a private company. If the NTTA doesn't ultimately waive primacy, any entity that wants to build the road would have to challenge the NTTA in court.

Neither of these means the toll road proposal is doomed. At this point, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, no one knows exactly what will be built on the railroad right-of-way, if anything.

Given that, he said, the question of primacy is premature.

"I think we would first have to decide if it will be a toll road and then [Public Werks] would show [projected traffic] numbers to the NTTA and then decide whether they want to hold on to it or hand it over to the group with primacy," Morris said.

And that's complicated by the route, which covers Collin and Hunt counties in the first construction phase. Collin County is part of the NTTA, Morris said, but Hunt County is not.

But other issues come first, like figuring out the proper route for a limited-access road, how it would connect to other highways and the impact of traffic.

"It doesn't necessarily have to take a lot of time," Morris said. "But you want to do it right the first time so you don't have to do it over again."

John N. Crew, who leads the Public Werks-Texas Turnpike Corp. project, said the NTTA might not even be the entity that determines primacy.

"Our project is not far enough along for them to comment on primacy," he said, "and it may be that TxDOT would grant us primacy."

"We're trying to do new things that NTTA hasn't even contemplated," Crew said.

While the project has received considerable support from officials in Hunt County, residents who own property near the old Cotton Belt rail corridor have fought the idea. Collin County has taken no official position, but two county commissioners, Cheryl Williams and Duncan Webb, say their constituents have serious concerns.

William said property owners who live along the old rail right-of-way worry that they could lose their homes to the highway project, "and for others, there's a fear of losing the rural way of life they have chosen."

The decision to change the language in the Mobility 2035 plan, which is up for final approval in April, is based in part on the need for more public hearings and building a consensus, Morris told members of the Regional Transportation Council at its March meeting. At one earlier hearing, he said he was handed a list with 300 signatures opposing the toll road project.

Most of the signatures came from the Josephine area of Collin County, Morris said, and that shows the need for "brainstorming."

"Maybe it's good to run a rail line through a town, but I'm not sure a toll road needs to bifurcate the town," he said. "Maybe we'd need a loop. Maybe the rail stays [on the right-of-way] and the road loops around the town."

Morris calls the process "homework that needs to be done" and said it doesn't necessarily slow the project.

None of this made Hunt County Judge John Horn, a key proponent of the toll road, happy about the changes.

"It seems like we've taken a couple of steps forward, and now we're going three steps backward," he said at the Regional Transportation Council meeting.

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Robert Dunbar 4 hours ago

Unless my Texas map and eyes have been deceiving me it appears that Collin county already connects with Hunt county via Highway 380 from McKinney to Greenville. TxDOT is already expanding 380 to four lanes. And there is no toll required to travel between these two cities. And anyone going from Wylie to Greenville can take Highway 78 south to the Highway 190 toll road (if they really want to pay a toll) and connect with Interstate 30 to Greenville (no toll on I30 so any increase in gasoline costs is likely offset by reduced toll fees). Alternatively people coming through Wylie can go north on 78 a short 18 pleasant mile drive to 380. I think there might be plans to expand 78 to four lanes from Wylie to the 380 junctions sometime in the future.

The Greenville City Council "Greenville City Council Strategic Vision, Values, Initiatives, and Objectives Fiscal Year 2012-2013" includes a statement that "Greenville will not experience explosive growth so we need to focus on business recruitment and be a retail magnet". So this begs the question of why would many people be in such a rush to get from Wylie to Greenville that a new toll way is required? If the idea is to eventually help people get to work in Greenville my recommendation is relocate to Greenville and enjoy a short commute. It's a thriving community with nice people who generally speak Texan. And once you move there you might not have much desire to travel so much back to Collin County (where Texan is also spoken but is much more "citified" in nature. So a toll road would likely not mean that much to you.

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