

Linking I-345 and Trinity road revives same old inaccurate claim



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It was déjà vu all over again when Michael Morris and Bill Hale sounded the alarm in their recent column about the Interstate 345 teardown proposal: “If there is going to be any hope of rethinking I-345, Trinity Parkway must be in place.”

Morris, director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, and Hale, Dallas district engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation, were invoking the same refrain used by Trinity toll road supporters for the last decade and a half: If there is going to be any hope of (*insert project*), the Trinity toll road must first be in place.

But now that these supposedly endangered projects are underway — no Trinity toll road in sight — how is it that toll road supporters continue to command any credibility?

Toll road advocates employed this tactic most aggressively during the 2007 Trinity toll road referendum, when they realized they could not garner enough support from voters by arguing for the road on its own merits. So instead, they took as hostage other worthy and necessary projects: the removal of S.M. Wright Freeway, the reconstruction of the Mixmaster, the creation of the urban lakes and Trinity park.

They convinced voters that none of these other projects could see the light of day without the toll road being built first. As one of the leading toll road advocates, Morris repeatedly warned voters, “Nearly \$5 billion of much-needed transportation projects will be in jeopardy if voters pull the plug on the Trinity Parkway.” “It will be impossible,” Morris proclaimed, to make improvements to the downtown Mixmaster or S.M. Wright’s Dead Man’s Curve “without the planned toll road.”

Seven years later, the Trinity toll road remains unapproved and unfunded. Yet TxDOT has begun construction on the four-year, \$798 million downtown Mixmaster project. Likewise, this fall, TxDOT will begin reconstructing S.M. Wright Freeway. And the city will soon begin excavating smaller versions of the long-promised Trinity lakes. All without the Trinity toll road.

With their scare tactics debunked, one would expect toll road supporters to be chastened. Instead, as projects once held hostage by the toll road are completed one by one, toll road supporters realize that their leverage — and their supporters — are dwindling. They must create a new *raison d’être* for the toll road, and they now have their sights on I-345.

This will be a tough sell, however, since toll road supporters acknowledged in 2007 that this portion of Central Expressway is not “directly impacted” by the toll road. If that ploy proves ineffective, toll road supporters will try to tie flood control improvements to the road. That, too, will be a difficult feat, since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a report on Friday stating that the recreational and flood control improvements within the Trinity levees can occur without the toll road, at less cost.

So why should we believe toll road supporters? These are the same individuals who swore that Dallas taxpayers would never pay another dime for the toll road, aside from the \$84 million in bond funds voters approved in 1998. “Dallas taxpayers’ cost is capped at \$84 million,” wrote Mayor Tom Leppert in 2007. Yet the corps’ report explains that if the city wants to build the toll road within the levees, it will have to move a portion of the Trinity River itself. By the corps’ estimation, this will take at least nine years to complete, at a cost of tens of millions of dollars — a large portion of which must be paid for by Dallas residents in new taxes.

If you have grown tired of broken promises, we invite you to join us at the final Trinity toll road public hearing, at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in downtown Dallas. It will be your last chance to voice your opposition to a project whose demise is long overdue.

This essay was written by former Dallas City Council member Angela Hunt and current members Sandy Greyson, Scott Griggs, Philip Kingston and Adam Medrano. Hunt may be contacted at angela@angelahunt.com, and the council members may be reached through dallascityhall.com.

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