

Transportation official: I-345 debate pushed by the wealthy, misses voices of the poor



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One of North Texas' most powerful transportation officials Thursday said the debate about tearing down Interstate 345 is missing some crucial voices — minorities, the poor and people who live near the aging highway.

Michael Morris, the North Central Texas Council of Governments transportation director, said the people pushing for a study on the matter are mainly politicians, business people and prominent residents. Morris said he noticed during a meeting about the highway that the drive for dramatically altering the 2.4-mile corridor isn't coming from drivers or nearby residents.

"They were all white, they were very wealthy and I don't think any of them live in the neighborhood," he said.

That's not to say that he doesn't see value in the passionate push to demolish the highway and make room for a potential real estate renaissance that could remake downtown.

"I love their voice," Morris said. "Don't misunderstand me."

Morris said the Texas Department of Transportation needs feedback from residents of East Dallas, who live near I-345, and people in South Dallas, who heavily use it. He said doing so is one reason why it will take TxDOT 10 years to study how best to redesign the corridor. That decade-long estimate is a contentious point in the ongoing debate about I-345's future.

Urban planner Patrick Kennedy, who co-founded the pro-demolition group A New Dallas, said TxDOT could do a conceptual study of options and impacts in a matter of months. He balked Thursday at the idea that public outreach is a driving factor behind timeline estimates for TxDOT's study.

"That would absolutely not take 10 years," Kennedy said.

Partnering with others

TxDOT has already begun the study. It plans to partner with other government entities and civic groups to take a full-scale look of what would happen to real estate, traffic and neighborhoods if the highway is torn down or replaced with some other thoroughfare.

I-345 isn't well known by its name. Maps and road signs mark it as either U.S. Highway 75 or Interstate 45. In actuality, I-345 is the raised connector between those two north-south highways. It forms the eastern border of downtown Dallas. More than 200,000 trips are made on it each weekday.

Morris' organization Thursday released estimates that show almost two-thirds of those trips are made by people who are coming from or driving to somewhere within Dallas. Some of the most frequent origins or destinations for I-345 users are along I-45 and S.M. Wright Freeway in the southern half of Dallas County.

Dallas City Council member Carolyn Davis, whose district covers much of that area, did not return phone calls seeking comment Thursday. Fellow South Dallas council member Tennell Atkins deferred to colleague Vonciel Jones Hill, who chairs the council's transportation committee. She has not returned phone calls seeking comment since last month. When reached in her law office, she twice said she was too busy to talk.

Grassroots group

A New Dallas is a grassroots group that is gaining national attention among transportation experts and urban planners for its campaign to have I-345 torn down. Tear-down supporters say the highway chokes downtown off from Deep Ellum and East Dallas. They say it prevents development not only on the land underneath the highway, but on acres surrounding it.

Kennedy has criticized TxDOT for acting more as a highway factory than a well-rounded transportation organization. Many experts say state transportation departments are stuck in a build-only mindset left over from the era of highway expansion and massive suburban growth following World War II.

Morris on Thursday defended TxDOT. The agency is planning a \$170 million redo of S.M. Wright, an ugly elevated freeway in southern Dallas. For decades, it has been criticized as preventing economic development and cutting off access to neighborhoods. TxDOT is replacing it with a landscaped boulevard and fixing the poorly designed interchange known as Dead Man's Curve.

Morris said much of the design work that will change that corridor was derived from working with residents. That level of outreach on a complicated project takes time, he said.

'Bring investment back'

Kennedy said A New Dallas is beginning to reach out to South Dallas neighborhoods to discuss their ideas for the corridor. He said tearing down I-345 could make life better for poorer residents because it would spur more residential and employment options downtown. People living there would have easier access to Dallas Area Rapid Transit's 61-station light-rail train network and wouldn't have to rely on highways as much.

"They understand this is a way to bring investment back toward the core," Kennedy said.

Morris said that so far, the push for tearing down I-345 has been "top-down and not bottom-up." He said the debate needs people who are likely to be affected to weigh in.

"It isn't broad enough," he said. "It has to include a lot more people."

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Elizabeth Walley

9 hours ago

Thank you Mr. Morris! As one of the non-wealthy East Dallas people who needs to get places via I-345, I've been positively alarmed at the conversation so far. Not to say it couldn't be changed, but the top priority ought to be the transportation needs of the citizens who use it, not developable real estate.

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Bushwood Smithie

8 hours ago

Amen!

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7 3



Gitanjali Deb

6 hours ago

If you live in East Dallas as I do, there's no where you have to go that makes I-345 a necessity.

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5 4



Pegaso

38 minutes ago

I am neither wealthy nor white, lived within a mile of 345 for 2 years, and support its demolition.

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