

I-345 bridge repair can't wait for highway-removal study



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By Bill Hale and Michael Morris

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On rare occasions, the opportunity arises to remake — and redefine — both a highway and its surroundings: Central Expressway. Woodall Rodgers. And starting this year, S.M. Wright Freeway.

In the last three decades, the Texas Department of Transportation has stood with its partners to explore the best way to address transportation needs and the community's needs.

Will Interstate 345 be next? It is a possibility.

The leaders of Dallas, TxDOT, the North Central Texas Council of Governments and others have agreed to discuss the idea of options to the Interstate 45 Overhead.

As we begin down this path, goals and expectations must be made clear. First, the existing 40-year-old bridge is in need of major maintenance. A repair project of approximately \$100 million is expected to start next year. That project must proceed.

While that project gets underway, a detailed study of removing the highway can begin. Decommissioning an existing interstate highway would require time, detailed study and a thorough exploration of the impacts to traffic and to the community. The National Environmental Policy Act requires an environmental assessment any time major changes are made to an existing federally funded highway.

Concerns from stakeholders on every side of the issue must be documented and addressed. Traffic impacts must be documented, and steps outlined on how those impacts will be mitigated. Consensus must be obtained.

It can be done. But it takes time and effort.

In the late 1990s, TxDOT and the city of Dallas began discussions about the future of U.S. Highway 175, also called S.M. Wright Freeway. In 2006, the focus of tearing down the elevated highway bisecting the Fair Park area took root. TxDOT held more than 50 community meetings and three public meetings in the years since. And in September 2013, the Federal Highway Administration approved the project.

Construction on the first phase of the \$170 million project will begin in 2015. The elevated highway will be replaced with a six-lane parkway by 2019.

In the 1980s, TxDOT and Dallas ultimately came to an agreement about the future of Central Expressway. The resulting \$700 million project transformed the area and spurred a host of economic development that is still occurring. And just a few years ago, TxDOT worked with the city and community partners on a multimillion-dollar project that decked Woodall Rodgers and produced one of the most significant public improvement projects in recent history — a park on top of a highway that now connects downtown and Uptown.

Decommissioning I-345 does have challenges. An estimated 200,000 vehicles a day traveled on a portion of the bridge in 2012, up from 170,000 vehicles a day in 2010.

Lowering any portion of the road or connecting streets below the existing ground level would also require dealing with a major underground drainage channel.

And finally, what to do about the traffic. If there is going to be any hope of rethinking I-345, Trinity Parkway must be in place. Trinity Parkway environmental reviews, which began more than a decade ago, are scheduled to be completed and federal approvals granted this summer. Consideration should also be given to a new "inner loop" study that would address how to move traffic from I-35E to the Hospital District to Love Field, and on to the Dallas North Tollway, Central and I-30.

Having the Trinity Parkway in place would help provide access to jobs in the growing Love Field area and Dallas Hospital District. With the parkway's ability to handle southeast Dallas to northwest Dallas travel patterns, more thoughtful consideration could also be given to transforming Interstate 30/East R.L. Thornton Freeway and possibly the Canyon area to include decks over existing highways, provided that funding for all of these projects is available from federal, state or local sources.

A discussion of bridge options can only occur when the safety of existing users is assured.

Michael Morris is the director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments and may be contacted at mmorris@nctcog.org. Bill Hale is the TxDOT Dallas district engineer and may be contacted through Regina.Kresge@txdot.gov.

On the agenda

The Regional Transportation Council will discuss the I-345 issue at a meeting that begins at 1 p.m. Thursday at the North Central Texas Council of Governments office in Arlington. For more information, go to nctcog.org.

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7 Comments

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Wylie H Dallas

24 minutes ago

[In the late 1990s, TxDOT and the city of Dallas began discussions about the future of U.S. Highway 175, also called S.M. Wright Freeway. In 2006, the focus of tearing down the elevated highway bisecting the Fair Park area took root. TxDOT held more than 50 community meetings and three public meetings in the years since. And in September 2013, the Federal Highway Administration approved the project.

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Dead Man's curve should have never been constructed by TxDOT to begin with... it would have never been allowed in a more affluent neighborhood.

The overwhelming message from the community was that S.M. Wright be converted into a neighborhood street that would encourage retail development, since the area already is well-served by numerous large arterials that have plenty of excess capacity. Instead, TxDOT ignored the wishes of the community and pushed forward with its own plan for a six-lane parkway through this poor neighborhood against its wishes.

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Clarence LeDearn

24 minutes ago

"And finally, what to do about the traffic. If there is going to be any hope of rethinking I-345, Trinity Parkway must be in place."

Thank you for telling us the real catalyst driving the rebuild promoters. So, if we kill Trinity Parkway, this foolishness also goes away...

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Wylie H Dallas

28 minutes ago

[Consensus must be obtained.]

How does it help to build consensus when the Transportation Director of NCTCOG, Michael Morris, accuses the proponents of a I-345 study of being disconnected, rich white racists whose only desire is to profit off of the poor?

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