



LBJ Express work taking toll, Dallas and Farmers Branch homeowners say



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In a year and a half, the dream of a quicker commute for thousands of Dallas drivers will become a reality with the LBJ Express Project.

But for now, say those who live in neighborhoods surrounding the freeway, it's a nightmare of property damage and sleepless nights caused by 24/7 construction.

In the spring of 2011, crews began constructing six new "Texpress" toll lanes designed to ease traffic on LBJ. The project, a public-private partnership between the Texas Department of Transportation and LBJ Infrastructure Group, will cost \$2.7 billion by the time it's done in 2015.

It's also proving costly for some Dallas and Farmers Branch residents who live 20 feet away from construction crews. Earth-shattering drills, night construction and an endless stream of red tape have pushed more than 100 homeowners to group together and demand money for repairs.

Ferrovial-Agroman, the Spanish construction company that holds a majority stake in LBJ Infrastructure Group, agreed last month to inspect homes in the neighborhoods, project spokeswoman Heather DeLapp said.

"We take every homeowner complaint seriously and have opened an investigation and are working with each homeowner to address their specific complaints," she said.

Maria Cazares has several complaints, from property damage to noise pollution, one of the most common problems cited by her and her neighbors.

"At night, we don't have peace and tranquility," she said in Spanish, translated by her daughter Iveth.

Cazares has lived in her home on High Meadow Drive for 15 years and had her foundation repaired in May 2010, before construction began on the project. In spring 2011, she felt something was "lifting and dropping" her home and contacted Ferrovial-Agroman about new cracks in her walls. They denied responsibility, she said.

Like many of her neighbors, Cazares met with attorneys about filing a lawsuit but was told it was impossible to go up against the Department of Transportation. Instead, she banded together with her neighbors and enlisted the help of veteran community activist Carlos Quintanilla after bumping into him at a McDonald's.

Quintanilla jokes that he should have gone to Wendy's that day, after all the time he's spent organizing the action group and representing homeowners. About two dozen held their first group meeting in November, and within months the group had ballooned to 120 homeowners.

Quintanilla points to more than \$7 million in "verifiable, documented damage" in the 100 or so homes, including shattered foundations, cracked walls and damaged fences. Most of the homeowners have refused to repair the damage, instead choosing to wait for contractors to claim responsibility.

Jack Abers, who bought his home from his in-laws in 1983, decided he couldn't wait. He hired a contractor in 2012 to stop his house from "shifting towards 635."

"We had to tear up the carpet, tear up the floor and put up nine additional piers in the interior of the home," he said, noting that the value of his home dropped from \$144,000 in 2010 to \$119,000 today.

Quintanilla said his office, Acción America, would receive 10 percent of any compensation if the homeowners are successful. He dedicates two staff members to organizing the neighborhood action groups, helping homeowners document damage with pictures, appraisals and personal statements.

"We've pulled together minimal resources to fight a giant," Quintanilla said.

BY THE NUMBERS The LBJ Express Project

Six new toll lanes on 635.

Five years of construction.

Damages claimed by homeowners: \$7 million.

Ferrovia-Agroman holds a 52-year lease over the toll lanes.

Ferrovia-Agroman stands to make \$50 million a year for the span of the lease.

120 homeowners comprise the 635 construction action group.

Cost of the project: \$2.7 billion.

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