

Era of the toll is about to dawn on Dallas-area highways

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North Texas drivers wanting to minimize their traffic problems will soon have to pay the piper that state lawmakers spent decades avoiding.

Virtually every major Dallas-Fort Worth highway project includes plans for new tolls, in many cases replacing what have traditionally been free carpool lanes. By the time billions in planned construction is done, most of the area's major corridors will either be toll roads or feature some sort of toll component.

In large part, the growing network of toll highways can be attributed to living in a state with a booming population and a Legislature that dodges solving transportation funding shortfalls.

Texas lawmakers haven't raised the state gas tax, the primary revenue source for transportation funding, in decades. They also haven't developed a meaningful, long-term alternative funding source. When inflation and fuel efficiency in vehicles are factored in, Texans effectively are paying far less to fund transportation needs than they were 20 years ago.

Transportation officials charged with minimizing congestion are increasingly turning to a patchwork of various financing methods. Virtually all of those plans rely on toll components whose estimated revenues are used to secure construction costs for new highways or expansions of existing ones.

"Because of the shortfalls in transportation funding, we have to find very innovative ways to get these projects across the goal line," said Christie Gotti, a senior program manager for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Planning officials with that agency, which steers billions to transportation projects, call it a financial crisis. State Sen. John Carona, who tried unsuccessfully to solve funding woes when he chaired the Senate's transportation committee, calls it a "political tragedy."

"This was highly predictable," said Carona, who was defeated in the March primary. "Myself and others have warned of this for the past decade in Austin."

Not all the same

None of this is to say that motorists will be forced to take toll routes. But if they want to avoid congestion on existing and expanded free lanes, they'll have to pay up. Long-term plans also call for eventually tolling carpoolers who have had exclusive access to high-occupancy vehicle lanes on highways such as Interstates 30 and 35E.

Nuances in how the lanes will operate are also likely to confuse some drivers, because not all toll thoroughfares will work the same. Some highways, like Dallas North Tollway and the planned Trinity Parkway, will be toll all the way through, and rates will remain the same throughout the day.

Other highways will have both free and toll lanes, such as LBJ Freeway and State Highways 183 and 114. The toll components of those highways are called managed toll lanes. Their rates, unlike on roads that are completely tolled, will fluctuate based on traffic congestion and speed.

And not even all managed toll lanes will operate the same. They're split into two categories.

Express lanes will be partially tolled. They will allow carpoolers to drive for free and solo drivers to pay a toll to jump in. TEXpress lanes will toll everyone who drives them, but carpoolers will get a 50 percent discount during rush hour.

Further complicating matters for carpoolers is additional technological bureaucracy. To get the price break on either type of managed lanes, carpool drivers will have to get a TollTag. They will then have to register online before driving their intended routes to essentially give highway operators a heads-up that they qualify for the discount.

Gotti said there's been a lot of discussion about causing toll fatigue. But she said there's no other way to meet the demand of traffic relief without toll components.

"We don't have a choice," she said.

Managed lanes

By 2018, North Texas will have more than 100 miles of managed toll lanes. They will be added on State Highways 114 and 183 in Irving. They will replace carpool lanes on Interstate 35E through Denton County and Interstate 30 on both sides of downtown Dallas.

That switch from free HOV lanes to both kinds of managed lanes comes at a time when the number of carpoolers in North Texas is dwindling, according to an analysis by *The Dallas Morning News* of U.S. census data on 55 area cities. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of North Texans working outside the home rose 17.6 percent. Those who drove to work alone increased at sharper rate of 22.6 percent. Those who carpoled fell 10.5 percent.

So while carpoolers made up 14.3 percent of commuters in 2000, they made up just 10.9 percent by 2012.

The eastern portion of LBJ Freeway between Greenville Avenue and Interstate 30 is the next corridor likely to see managed lanes replace carpool lanes. Plans are to have them converted by the end of next year.

A consultant for the Texas Department of Transportation told Dallas City Council members Monday that allowing solo drivers to use those lanes will almost double the number of cars on them.

"It's a short-term improvement to make use of what we have out there," said Matthew Craig, a vice president for Halff Associates.

The overall move from free carpool lanes to a network of managed toll lanes theoretically will free up more space on existing free lanes. It will also add a revenue source for transportation coffers.

Carona, the state senator, said the reliance on tolls actually costs North Texans more than raising the gas tax would have. He said that toll projects cost more than three times what free roads do because they involve much more complicated financing methods and typically involve private developers who aim to make a profit.

Carona said politicians who pat themselves on the back for not raising the gas tax have effectively hit their constituents' pocketbooks harder.

"It's been a hoax on the public," he said.

IF YOU GO

What: Public meeting about planned toll lanes on LBJ Freeway from Greenville Avenue to Interstate 30

When: 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Highland Oaks Church of Christ, 10805 Walnut Hill Lane, Dallas

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