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# TxDOT possibly could help close Trinity toll road funding gap



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The state's transportation department, already cash-strapped and looking to voters for relief, could help pay for a controversial toll road that would run along the east levee of the Trinity River.

Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said the Texas Department of Transportation is among a cadre of public agencies trying to figure out how to fund the \$1.5 billion road. He said that group includes his organization, Dallas City Hall and the North Texas Tollway Authority.

"We haven't gotten far enough in the process to know who's funding which parts," Morris said.

A member of the Texas Transportation Commission, which oversees TxDOT, said he doesn't believe anyone from the agency is in discussions to help fund the project. He said doing so would be difficult because it would come at the expense of other area projects. But he said it's within the realm of possibility.

"Never say never. But that would be a challenge," commissioner Victor Vandergriff said.

TxDOT's involvement could move the long-delayed and divisive road closer to completion. But that would also push it further from what Dallas voters were promised.

City leaders in 2007 portrayed the parkway as a project that would essentially be paid for by the motorists who would eventually drive it. Financial help from gas tax revenue or other statewide funds was never mentioned.

Dallas has about \$77 million earmarked for the project. About \$40 million of that has already been spent or is already obligated to expected costs. The Regional Transportation Council, the transportation arm of the Council of Governments, set aside about \$141 million. It spent about \$28 million of that on designing enough of the project to go forward and seek federal approval of plans.

That leaves more than \$1.2 billion to be funded. Vandergriff said TxDOT would only look at funding the project if the NTTA asks the state to help. It's been more than five years since the tollway authority said it won't be able to come up with more than \$1 billion needed for the project by itself. The agency has no funds set aside for the project. Any money it would bring would probably come from selling bonds that would be repaid with tolls the road is expected to generate.

"We've always said it takes a village," said NTTA spokesman Michael Rey.

NTTA won't begin to figure out the exact amount it can bring to the table until after federal authorities approve the project. The final verdict from federal officials isn't expected until later this year.

"At this particular point, there's nothing being taken off the table," Morris said.

## Arguments against

The regional attempts to put together funding come as international experts and academicians say additional highway capacity will only

increase — not relieve — roadway congestion. They argue that such projects subsidize suburban sprawl at the cost of Dallas' quality of life.

The toll road has been planned as a 9-mile road, most of which would run inside the Trinity River's levees. It would connect Interstate 45 southeast of downtown to Interstate 35E and State Highway 183 northwest of downtown.

The parkway was planned as part of the Trinity River Corridor Project, which aims to turn the vacant floodway into a massive urban park filled with lakes, recreational areas and trails. Voters first approved \$246 million for the corridor project in 1998. They narrowly agreed to keep the toll road as part of the overall redo of the river in a 2007 vote.

Patrick Kennedy co-founded the grass-roots group A New Dallas, which advocates for transportation officials to rethink how they approach policy and planning initiatives. The group and several urban planning experts say transportation departments too often use new roads to solve congestion without thinking of the effects on neighborhoods, the environment and development.

Kennedy said the toll road plans will saddle the region for decades with a road that essentially duplicates the route of Interstate 35E at a time TxDOT can't afford other area projects.

"I would think there are more important places for them to put their money," said Kennedy, who was part of a tongue-in-cheek funeral for the toll road last month.

Morris said the project's additional capacity is needed to relieve current and expected congestion created when highways narrow as they move cars into downtown.

"Otherwise, all you're doing is parking a bunch of cars behind the bottleneck," Morris said.

### Voters' decision

Attempts to keep the project alive come on the eve of a statewide campaign season in which voters will decide whether TxDOT should be partially funded by certain energy tax revenue being gathered in a ballooning state savings account.

That new revenue would not be allowed to be spent on a project with a tolling component. But the new source of revenue could help TxDOT free up existing funds to put toward the Trinity — if NTTA says it needs help and state leaders agree to jump in.

"The commission is going to be challenged to devote the kind of expense on that at the expense of other downtown projects," Vandergriff said.

Morris said the shortfall could be reduced by scaling back the project. He said it could be built in phases, but how that would look compared to what was submitted to federal officials remains to be seen. Once the scope of the project is determined, NTTA can figure out what it can contribute. Then officials will look for ways to fill shortfalls.

Morris said he's not yet certain that TxDOT would put money in, but that "we'll see what the art of the possible is."

"Yes, they're sitting at the table, just like we're sitting at the table," he said.

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