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## The twists and turns of Dallas' Interstate 345



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The Texas Department of Transportation hasn't begun its study of the costs and traffic impacts of replacing an elevated highway with a street-level boulevard on the east side of downtown Dallas. But questions already surround how officials are approaching what to do with Interstate 345.

The aging, elevated highway is the local battleground for a national debate over how transportation should be approached in the 21st century. A growing number of urban planners and business leaders say the highway is suppressing economic development and undermining opportunities to make Dallas more walkable.

But one of North Texas' most influential transportation officials publicly declared last month that regional and state leaders will never consider replacing I-345 with anything but another highway.

"There's not much our office is going to be able to do to help them and there's not much TxDOT's office will be able to do," Michael Morris, the transportation director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said during a meeting at City Hall.

State officials denied they've reached that conclusion. They say their study will include estimated expenses and necessary logistics of replacing I-345 with a boulevard, which is supposed to be the basis for an informed regional debate on how to move forward.

"It will not be handicapped," said Victor Vandergriff, a member of the Texas Transportation Commission, which oversees TxDOT.

Morris' agency implements regional transportation policies and disburses federal funds at the direction of the 43-member Regional Transportation Council. That board has not taken a formal position on the I-345 debate. But Morris' declaration has bred skepticism about the results of the study and drawn criticism from the leader of a nonprofit that launched the debate over the highway.

"That's inappropriate for a staff person to be suggesting policy," said Patrick Kennedy, an urban planner who co-founded A New Dallas, which supports demolishing the highway.

Meanwhile, two other facts are further muddying the waters. For one, I-345 is also the subject of at least two other studies. Plus, TxDOT's study will probably tie the highway's fate to how transportation officials and Dallas City Hall prioritize that project alongside plans for remaking Interstate 30.

"You can't look at one of these without looking at the others," said TxDOT spokesman Tony Hartzel.

### Source of confusion

I-345 runs for about 1.4 miles as it connects I-30, Interstate 45, U.S. Highway 75 and Woodall Rodgers. Many assume it is part of North Central Expressway or I-45 because there are no signs identifying it by its highway number. Most maps don't accurately identify it either.

A 2013 traffic study estimated that about 200,000 trips are made on the small stretch of highway each weekday. Transportation officials, like Morris, say those numbers show the vital role I-345 plays in keeping other nearby highways from becoming too congested.

"I have found no one above my pay grade that supports the elimination of the main lanes of 345," Morris said last month during a public

presentation of regional transportation projects.

But focusing solely on traffic counts is too myopic, says Kennedy. He said officials also should consider the quality of life in the urban core and the potential tax revenue generated from increased land prices. His grass-roots campaign against the highway has reached mainstream status and is a large driving force behind TxDOT's look at the highway.

"Ultimately we have to be talking about our priorities here," Kennedy said. "Is it the city or is it the movement of traffic from Mexico to Oklahoma?"

### **I-30 factor**

TxDOT's study of I-345 also will look at the costs and feasibility of redoing I-30 east of downtown. Plans for that east-west corridor could include rebuilding it below street level to reconnect East Dallas and Fair Park. They also could include adding infrastructure to support city-funded deck parks near the Cedars area and Fair Park.

Hartzel said the state is looking at the highways together because whatever happens on one will undoubtedly affect traffic on the other. Plus, city officials will have to help prioritize spending a limited amount of state funds.

"We want to keep having that discussion and see where it leads," Hartzel said.

It could take years to reach those decisions. In the meantime, Hartzel said, the aging I-345 needs major repairs. State engineers don't believe the road is in bad enough condition to close. But they don't believe it's in good enough shape to delay renovations.

The state plans to spend up to \$242 million fixing the highway, an amount state officials say won't affect whatever long-term solution is recommended. Estimates originally called for about \$100 million in fixes. Officials say the higher figure is only being used for budgeting purposes and they won't know the full cost until their ongoing, short-term study of the highway is complete.

But Kennedy said the shifting numbers — combined with Morris' highway-only declaration — make him skeptical about what the long-term study will say about the costs of a teardown.

"I do not know if we're going to get accurate numbers," he said.

### **Yet another study**

TxDOT is not the only entity looking into I-345's future. The Real Estate Council, made up of commercial real estate industry professionals, is teaming up with the city to look at the highway. The real estate group has committed \$125,000. President and CEO Linda McMahon said the hope is that the study makes some sort of recommendation before TxDOT starts spending money on repairs.

"We feel like it's time to sit back, take a look at what our options are and make a logical decision about what really makes sense for the city of Dallas," she said.

Both McMahon and city officials said they don't yet know the scope of their study. Their first talks about the matter are slated for this week.

Keith Manoy, an assistant public works director for Dallas, said it's too soon to say what the differences or similarities will be between their look at the highway and the one the state will conduct.

Eventually, all three entities could combine forces.

"Ultimately, that may be where we end up," he said. "I just don't know."

*Follow Brandon Formby on Twitter at @brandonformby.*