



Blacklands Corridor study will address transportation needs in Collin, Hunt counties



By MICHAEL E. YOUNG

Staff Writer

myoung@dallasnews.com

Published: 01 September 2013 10:35 PM

Updated: 01 September 2013 10:50 PM

When plans for a private toll road between Lavon and Greenville went public earlier this year, the Blacklands Corridor became a battleground between residents and their rural lifestyle and the economic hopes of business interests and elected officials.

Now the North Central Texas Council of Governments and its Regional Transportation Council have called a cease-fire. Forget arguing over a single road and instead come up with a plan that addresses future growth in eastern Collin and Hunt counties, NCTCOG said.

“On the analytical side, you need to determine purpose and need,” said Michael Morris, who leads the RTC. “Then after you do that, you generate solutions that meet those needs. What most people do is come up with a solution, then look for the need.”

The Blacklands Corridor — essentially the old Cotton Belt railroad right of way that traces the narrow neck of land between Lavon Lake and Lake Ray Hubbard and runs across the prairie to Greenville — comes with a number of transportation issues.

State Highway 78 already carries a lot of traffic near Lavon Lake, Morris said, but there’s no real transportation network to the east.

“You can’t turn down growth,” he said, “but there isn’t enough capacity available. To the credit of the private sector, they’re pointing out we do not have an adequate transportation network there, and they propose to fix that.”

Plans for a huge rail hub west of Greenville are in the works, and the Kansas City Southern Railway is already building an intermodal hub near Wylie that brings trains and trucks together along with other kinds of development, he said.

“And on the western end [of the corridor] you have one of the fastest-growing areas in the U.S., but that growth isn’t necessarily homogenous all the way out to Greenville,” Morris said.

A detailed study of transportation needs will take 15 to 18 months, Morris said, though a preliminary report could be available later this year.

Meanwhile, Morris and the transportation council will work to build consensus among groups with very different points of view.

“We’ve done that a number of times — in the LBJ [Interstate 635] project now underway, for example,” Morris said. “There was a lot of opposition, and we ended up with a plan that is no wider and no higher” than the original highway.

“Fortunately, we have a private-sector group that is very interested in building something” in the Blacklands Corridor, Morris said of Public Werks-Texas Turnpike Corp., a Dallas firm that proposed the toll road. “Unfortunately, we have a private-sector group that isn’t always as patient as it needs to be.”

The RTC asked Texas Turnpike officials to step back while the first part of the study — which focuses on the toll road proposal — is completed, and Texas Turnpike agreed, said Neal Barker, a corporate vice president.

“Several months ago, the RTC decided a feasibility study needed to be done, and we agreed and fully support that,” Barker said. He expected that part of the RTC’s work — which looks at “what we’ve already done” — to be complete in March.

Brenda Short, who created the notollroad.com website when word of the proposal began to circulate, said she and others living near the rail right of way have been “pretty pleased with the response from COG.”

"I don't think we're just going to swallow everything, hook, line and sinker," she said. "It's a process and anything can happen. But we're optimistic that the toll road may not happen, at least the way Public Werks wanted."

Short said she and others who chose to live in the small towns and country setting in Hunt and eastern Collin counties are there because they wanted that particular lifestyle.

"You know you'll have a little longer commute, but that's the choice you made," she said. "Then when someone comes in and wants to slap a road down because they've chosen a different lifestyle, that's just not fair."

Hunt County Judge John Horn, who has supported the toll road plan, said he was pleased with the NCTCOG/RTC decision to study transportation needs in the region.

"This is one of the main things Hunt County has endeavored to do — to get a transportation plan so that when things come up, we can make more objective decisions," he said. "I really wanted to focus on taking away the subjectivity of implementing projects."

With public-private partnerships becoming more common in transportation, a planning roadmap is crucial, Horn said. So is an understanding of the way things work when government is involved.

"Now this is just a John Horn opinion," he said, "but I think people in the private sector can get a little frustrated at the speed at which government can put things in play.

"But at the end of the day, Public Werks, in my dealings, have been extremely compliant," Horn said. "They know they have to be mindful of the process that has to take place."

Did you see something wrong in this story, or something missing? [Let us know.](#)

Comments

To post a comment, log into your chosen social network and then add your comment below. Your comments are subject to our [Terms of Service](#) and the privacy policy and terms of service of your social network. If you do not want to comment with a social network, please consider writing a [letter to the editor](#).

 Login to post a comment

Login    ... 

Post

3 Comments

[RSS](#) | [Subscribe](#)

 **John Hix** 20 hours ago

The NTTA seems to always put the cart before the horse. The endless cycle of development and transportation needs seems not to be well thought out. On the one hand we build the highways for projected development that will require more volume but on the other hand increased volume only leads to developers that are spurred by easy commutes foreseen by customers that want to live in the country but are still tied to the city.

[Reply](#) 0   0

 **Jimmie** 2 days ago

See who is buying up the land on the proposed routes and that will tell you who benefits the most from another NTTA "mobility solution"!

[Reply](#) [1 reply](#) 3   0

 **Tom** 1 day ago

I betchee one of da buyers is Jerrah Jones!

[Reply](#) 0   0