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Expansion of Interstate 35E to begin this year

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Interstate 35E will be expanded between Dallas and Denton beginning in mid-2013, after a state commission selected a developer to rebuild the congested corridor.

Motorists can expect about 3 1/2 years of construction on I-35E between LBJ Freeway in the Dallas/Carrollton area and the I-35E/35W split in Denton, officials said. The work is scheduled to be complete in 2016.

Although the I-35E project is centered in Dallas and Denton counties, the reconstruction project likely will affect thousands of Fort Worth-area residents each day. About one in five Tarrant County workers commutes to the Dallas area, according to Census Bureau estimates.

AGL Constructors was selected for the roughly \$1 billion project, which includes adding a free lane in each direction, reversible toll lanes and improved frontage roads. The AGL team includes Archer Western Contractors LLC of Atlanta, Granite Construction Co. of Watsonville, Calif., and The LANE Construction Co. of Cheshire, Conn.

"It was a very complicated project, a complicated project to score," Ed Pensock, Texas Department of Transportation strategic projects director, told Texas Transportation Commission members. "There are many complicated issues within the corridor to be resolved."

\$1.5 billion project

AGL is committing to design and build the 28-mile project for \$849 million and also could provide \$29 million in maintenance during the first 15 years, according to the development team's winning proposal.

The agreement also lays out numerous add-ons totaling \$287 million, but those improvements are contingent upon the state transportation department or local entities finding the additional funds, Pensock said.

Denton County has already committed nearly \$600 million in funds from its share of the region's toll revenue.

Including right-of-way and utility work, the agreement with AGL Constructors could include up to \$1.5 billion worth of work, Pensock said.

Long term, the I-35E corridor is slated to receive \$4.8 billion worth of improvements over the next couple of decades, but much of that work remains unfunded.

Still, the promise of some short-term relief should make life easier for the roughly 200,000 motorists who endure traffic headaches on I-35E each day.

"We are excited to see momentum on I-35E and hope to provide Texas drivers with some much-needed traffic congestion relief sooner than later," Texas Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said in a statement. "As we continue to face challenges with transportation funding, public/private partnerships such as this one will remain essential components for addressing our state's mobility needs and spurring our economic prosperity."

Right-of-way donations

Jeff Moseley of Houston, a transportation commission member, said additional work in the I-35E corridor can be speeded up if private property owners in the area are willing to give up some land for right-of-way -- and he urged Metroplex leaders to seek out those private entities as partners.

When the state has to buy right-of-way, it often adds millions of dollars to the cost of a road project, especially in metro areas where real estate prices are high.

When private land owners donate land, it saves the state money and makes road projects more affordable. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement, as property owners with good access to their land typically experience higher property values.

In the 1980s, AllianceTexas developer Hillwood donated about 280 acres in far north Fort Worth, to jump-start the construction of Texas 170. The state was then able to build the Texas 170 frontage roads years ahead of schedule -- and millions of dollars cheaper.

"I'm hoping ... there will be vigorous, aggressive communications to the private sector that they can participate," said Moseley, who also is a former Denton County judge. "We certainly have this passive response -- yes, legally we can receive your donation -- but it would be

wonderful for the North Central Texas Council of Governments and other allies of this project to step forward and invite the private sector to donate right-of-way so we can stretch our dollars and the project can be done more rapidly and cost-effectively."

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