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# Texas 360 road expansion to Mansfield hits snags

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BY GORDON DICKSON  
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ARLINGTON — Like the traffic each day on Texas 360, the effort to extend the highway from Arlington to Mansfield has been stop-and-go.

Because of delays in recent months, officials are no longer confident their plan to build Texas 360 toll lanes from just north of East Sublett Road/West Camp Wisdom Road to U.S. 287 — about 10 miles in all — can be done by 2015, as originally pledged.

“Well, 2015 always seemed a bit optimistic to me,” said state Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, one of several area leaders who have pushed for completion of the project. “Ultimately, maybe we should think in terms of latter-2015.”

Nonetheless, officials from two agencies who hope to form a partnership and build the project —the Texas Department of Transportation and North Texas Tollway Authority — say they are reworking some of the details and are optimistic they can have a deal signed in a matter of weeks.

The transportation department’s most recent schedule — which will be highlighted in a public hearing on the project scheduled Thursday in south Arlington — shows the work not even beginning until 2015, and not being completed until 2018. But officials from both agencies say they can get the project done more quickly if they reduce the number of new lanes built in the first phase of construction.

But others say the entire plan, which has been discussed for more than a decade, may be falling through the cracks as both agencies struggle with limited funding for new road work.

“I’m fearful that these two entities may be unable to reach an agreement and this may be our last chance to get 360 south built,” said Tarrant County Commissioner Andy Nguyen of Arlington, whose precinct includes the road. “Funding sources are drying up, and the state has put the brakes on private funding and its authority to borrow.”

### Vital connection

Texas 360 is a major north-south corridor in the middle of the Metroplex — a vital connection between



View photos

### Texas 360 hearing

A public hearing will be held Thursday for residents who want to learn more about plans to extend Texas 360 from East Sublett Road/West Camp Wisdom Road to U.S. 287.

- When: 6 p.m. open house; 7 p.m. formal presentation.
- Where: Timberview High School, 7700 S. Watson Road, Arlington.
- More information: 214-320-4481.

Source: Texas Department of Transportation.

Read more in the Honkin' Mad traffic blog

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growing cities such as Arlington and Mansfield and major job centers such as Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

But while Arlington and Mansfield continue to grow to the south, the main freeway lanes of Texas 360 only extend as far south as about 1,310 feet north of East Sublett Road and West Camp Wisdom Road — less than two miles south of I-20. Beyond that point, there are only frontage roads.

The transportation department and tollway authority have been discussing working together on an expansion of Texas 360 for several years — and both agree that while they want existing lanes to remain free, the best way to stretch the region's limited stash of highway dollars further is to make future additional lanes on Texas 360 toll lanes.

The long-term plan is to build four new main lanes in each direction from East Sublett Road/West Camp Wisdom Road to Broad Street in Mansfield, and three new main lanes in each direction from Broad Street to U.S. 287. That ultimate plan is the subject of a federally-required environmental hearing that will be held Thursday evening at Timberview High School in Mansfield.

But for now, the tollway authority and transportation department have mutually agreed to build a smaller portion of the project until funds are available to build the entire corridor. The scaled-down version includes building two main lanes in each direction from East Sublett Road/West Camp Wisdom Road to Broad Street, and one lane in each direction from Broad Street to U.S. 287.

The portion of the road with only one lane in each direction would have passing areas, where faster vehicles could get around slower traffic.

By building only part of the road now, the initial cost can be reduced. Officials from the transportation department say the entire project would cost about \$625 million, although Nguyen said he was told the initial cost can be reduced to \$350 million to \$400 million by limiting the number of new lanes and finding other savings.

In their material for the environmental hearing, transportation department officials pegged the cost of the scaled-down plan even lower than that — at about \$300 million.

## Partnership

After years of discussion, officials from both agencies agreed in January and February to build the road jointly. According to that agreement — known as a memorandum of understanding — the transportation department would build and finance the project, then turn it over to the tollway authority for operation, toll collection and maintenance.

The tollway authority in turn would make regular payments to the transportation department, using toll road proceeds.

But since that agreement was reached, the state Legislature has completed a regular and three special sessions — all of which ended with the transportation department receiving fewer dollars for new road projects than agency leaders had hoped.

So, transportation department officials have floated the idea of taking a smaller role in the project — perhaps loaning the tollway authority \$300 million at a low interest rate to cover most of the construction costs, and having the tollway authority do the initial work on the project and assume more of the financial risks. Then, once the new lanes were open, the tollway authority would repay the loan with toll proceeds.

Making a loan available allows the tollway authority and transportation department to proceed with the Texas 360 project, without hurting either agency's ability to possibly pay for another project — the Trinity Parkway project near downtown Dallas — in the near future, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. The Trinity Parkway project, a nine-mile corridor that would connect Interstate 35E to U.S. 175, is considered a priority by Dallas-area officials, who have said they don't want other projects interfering with it.

Officials on both sides say progress has been made in the negotiations.

"I know our department has been in contact with NTTA to discuss the project financing and the parameters of the deal," said Victor Vandergriff of Arlington, a Texas Transportation Commission member who previously served on the tollway authority board. "I think they're mulling it over now. I'm hopeful that it will move forward."

But those who are eagerly awaiting the extension of Texas 360 say they'd like to see some tangible progress.

"Right now, essentially NTTA and TxDot are negotiating with one another," Nguyen said, "and they're not letting us know the details."

Former Fort Worth Mayor Kenneth Barr, the tollway authority board chairman, said there is still time to work out a deal. He noted that after Thursday's environmental hearing, it will still take another three to

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six months before the federal environmental process is completed.

Construction can't begin until that process is complete, providing time for more negotiations, he said.

"The main thing I would say is, I'm confident the road will be built," Barr said. "TxDot has committed to fund it, and we have been assured from them they will do that, and we will get it built."

"I think there is apprehension about whether the road is going to be built. I think I can speak without hesitation that TxDot and NTTA are committed to seeing this road constructed as soon as is practical."

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