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Fort Worth Star Telegram
By Gordon Dickson

Speed up: Limits could soon increase on DFW freeways

North Texas drivers soon may be able to press the pedal a little closer to the metal.

Speed limits could be raised by 5 mph on many freeways across the Dallas-Fort Worth area by the 43-person planning group called the Regional Transportation Council at its regular meeting Thursday in Arlington. The move would reverse a 13-year-old policy of keeping speed limits low to reduce pollution from automobile emissions.

Regional planners have determined the low limits may no longer be necessary.

“The air quality benefit of traveling 60 or 65 mph now isn’t really as significant as it was in 2001,” said Jahnae Stout, spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. For decades, that agency has been instrumental in helping the region craft a plan to comply with increasingly tough federal pollution reduction laws.

If the measure is approved, signs with new speed limits could be installed on some Metroplex freeways once state and federal agencies sign off on the decision, a Texas Department of Transportation spokeswoman said.

The change would cover a lot of territory. For example, speed limits of 60 mph could be raised to 65 mph on Interstate 20, Loop 820 and Texas 121 in central Fort Worth, Grapevine, North Richland Hills and cities in or near the center of Tarrant County.

Speed limits of 65 mph could be raised to 70 mph on I-35W from Burleson to the south, and Alliance Airport to the north. Also, a 65 mph posted limit could be raised to 70 mph on U.S. 287 from I-35W north to Wise County, and from I-20 south through Mansfield.

The move wouldn’t affect highways where speed limits are already higher, outside the urbanized region of North Texas. For example, the speed limit on I-35 is already 75 mph for motorists traveling south of Johnson County toward Waco and Austin. Also, motorists on I-20 west of Weatherford toward Abilene, and east toward Shreveport, La., can already legally travel at 75 mph.

The threshold is even higher in the state’s most remote areas. I-10 and I-20 allow legal speeds of 80 mph between Monahans and El Paso in far West Texas. Between Austin and Seguin, motorists may travel 85 mph on the Central Texas Turnpike, assuming they’re willing to pay a toll.

The higher speed limits more accurately represent the pace at which traffic actually flows, and “more safely transitions the speed limits from the rural areas entering the Metroplex,” transportation department spokeswoman Jodi Hodges said.

Motorists have been asked to take it a bit easier in the state’s most populated areas since the early part of the last decade.

Research updated

In 2001, the Regional Transportation Council approved a plan to reduce speeds across the board by 5 mph, as Metroplex officials scrambled to find ways to meet EPA requirements.

The 5 mph cuts were included in a document submitted to the EPA by the state of Texas to show what steps would be taken to clean the air.

In recent months, the state transportation department — which owns and manages nearly 80,000 highway miles across the state — asked the North Central Texas Council of Governments to review the lower speed limits and see whether it would be feasible to reverse course.

Updated research by the council of governments shows that increasing speed limits by 5 mph could increase the emission of nitrogen oxides emitted into the air by roughly 0.4 tons a day. Nitrogen oxides, frequently referred to as NOx, are potentially harmful chemical compound produced by automobile engines powered by fossil fuels.

But the council of governments also identified several ongoing transportation improvements that would reduce traffic congestion and therefore reduce NOx emissions. Those include better traffic signal timing, the use of technology to warn motorists of bottlenecks and restrictions on trucks in the left lanes of many highways.

In preparing to raise the speed limits by 5 mph, Metroplex officials in recent months submitted to the EPA a list of things that could be done to offset any negative impact on air pollution, Stout said. The EPA approved use of offsets last month, clearing the way for the RTC to officially change the speed limits.

Back in 2001, computer modeling of automobile emissions suggested that when cars, pickups or heavy trucks surpassed 60 or 65 mph, emissions spiked. But more recent models that include the increased fuel efficiency of newer vehicles show the increase is not as dramatic as previously thought, said Chris Klaus, council of governments senior program manager.

“The faster emissions generally flat line at higher speeds for both cars and trucks now,” Klaus said.

But he said the new computer models show an increase in emissions when vehicles travel at speeds below 35 mph, a common problem during gridlocked periods, especially during weekday mornings and afternoons.

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KXAS NBC
By Tim Ciesco

360 Tollway Project Moving Forward

The Texas Department of Transportation is moving forward with plans to make a portion of state Highway 360 a toll road. The toll road would stretch from Sublett Road in Arlington to U.S. 287 near Mansfield.

Mansfield resident Elizabeth Rizzo has no problems taking SH 360 during the afternoons so she and her daughter can get frozen yogurt. During the morning and evening commutes, though, she goes out of her way to avoid it.

“Down here, it backs up tremendously,” said Rizzo. “The stop lights, the way it splits into access roads – it creates a terrible backup.”

The Texas Department of Transportation said SH 360 is one of the top 20 most congested roads in the state. TxDOT wants to make a 10-mile stretch of it, south of Interstate 20, into a toll road.

Specifically, TxDOT plans to build two new toll lanes in each direction from Sublett Road / Camp Wisdom Road to East Broad Street – and one new toll lane in each direction from East Broad Street to U.S. 287.

“There’s a section of this roadway that has more than 90,000 cars on it every day,” said Lisa Walzl, a spokesperson for TxDOT. “We believe this project will ease that congestion and improve safety in the region.”

The agency recently approved a deal with the North Texas Tollway Authority to move forward with the \$300 million project. TxDOT will cover the costs up front and oversee construction of the toll roads. Then,

the NTTA will operate the road and use the tolls it collects to pay back TxDOT. The existing lanes of 360 through that area will remain where they are and become frontage roads. Drivers won't have to pay to use the frontage roads – but TxDOT officials say between the traffic lights and other delays people may encounter on them, they're confident drivers will use the toll roads.

"We believe there is enough demand for this project," said Walzl.

Rizzo says she looks forward to using the toll roads – and while she admits not everyone feels the same way she does, she believes there are many people out there who'd rather pay a toll than sit in traffic.

"I commute into Downtown Dallas often and coming home, I know that will be much more convenient for me and several others," said Rizzo.

TxDOT just released a Request for Qualifications on this project, which is the first step in hiring a contractor.

Walzl said they hope to award a contract for the project by early 2015, then begin construction that fall.