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Vroom! Higher speed limits approved for North Texas

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BY GORDON DICKSON
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Speed limits on many Metroplex freeways will soon be raised by 5 mph after the Regional Transportation Council voted unanimously on Thursday to end its 13-year policy of keeping limits low to reduce pollution.



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Motorists can expect the new speed limits to be rolled out over time — perhaps over a few months — rather than all at once, said Bill Hale, Texas Department of Transportation Dallas district engineer. Meanwhile, motorists must continue to drive the posted speed to avoid getting a ticket, several officials said.

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Improvements to auto emissions since 2001 have dramatically reduced the amount of potentially dangerous nitrogen oxides emitted by cars and trucks at higher speeds, making the lower speed limits unnecessary, North Central Texas Council of Governments staff members told the 43-member RTC.

"We didn't decrease speeds for safety reasons back in 2001. We did so for environmental reasons," said Mark Enoch, who represents Dallas Area Rapid Transit on the RTC. "We're not raising speeds to be more dangerous."

Michael Morris, council of governments transportation director, added that raising the speed limits in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area will help traffic move at a pace closer to the higher speeds in rural areas. It can be dangerous for traffic moving at higher rural speeds to enter a populated area and suddenly have to decelerate, he said.

"We are taking advantage of new emissions standards in cars and trucks, and putting speed limits back to the safety levels," Morris said.

Speed limits of 60 mph will be raised to 65 mph on Interstate 20, Loop 820 and Texas 121 in central Fort

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.

But Hale said that before any of the environmental-based restrictions are removed, the state transportation department must submit its plans to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and federal Environmental Protection Agency — a process that could take weeks.

Officials also wouldn't rule out the possibility that speed limits in certain freeway corridors could even go beyond the 5 mph across-the-board increase.

Hale said the state transportation department is conducting ongoing speed studies in many of the corridors where the speed limits will change.

Speed limits are already much higher outside the North Texas metro area. 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

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legally travel at 75 mph.

Portions of I-10 and I-20 in far west Texas allow legal speeds of 80 mph, and the Central Texas Turnpike southeast of Austin allows 85 mph.

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