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Chisholm Trail Parkway set to open in southwest Fort Worth

Posted Saturday, May. 03, 2014 4 comments Print Reprints Share Like 491

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Fifty-two years after it was first envisioned, Chisholm Trail Parkway is finally set to open, on Mother's Day.

Weather permitting, the May 11 debut of the 28-mile toll road connecting downtown Fort Worth to Cleburne will mark a landmark moment in the region's transportation history.

The toll road is seen as a gateway for commercial and residential development in southwest Fort Worth, as well as cities in northern Johnson County, such as Joshua and Cleburne.

The area southwest of Fort Worth's century-old urban neighborhoods is still largely prairie, and it's among the few large pockets of undeveloped land relatively close to the center of the Metroplex.

In other words, it's a part of town that — once the road is open and access is improved — seems destined to blossom.

"I always felt like we would get there eventually, but it's been a long trek, no doubt about it," said Kenneth Barr, chairman of the North Texas Tollway Authority and a former Fort Worth mayor. "I think people are going to be very pleased with the way it looks. When people weigh the value of their time, they'll find using the road is a viable option."

The cost of using the toll road will depend on the distance traveled. The maximum cost for traveling the entire road will be \$4.91 for vehicles with a TollTag on the windshield and \$7.37 for those without.

Not all ramps open

The main lanes are scheduled to open, but access to the toll road will be limited in some areas, including at Interstate 30 near downtown Fort Worth, because of construction in the corridor.

Flyover ramps connecting I-30 to Chisholm Trail Parkway west of Summit Avenue likely won't be finished for months, possibly not until October, officials said. Motorists in downtown Fort Worth will be asked to use Montgomery Street or University Drive to enter the new road.

Direct connections to Interstate 20 in southwest Fort Worth probably won't be ready until late summer or early fall, officials said.

Also, tollway authority officials said there's a remote chance that the planned May 11 debut could be delayed a day or two by rainy weather during the week. Several activities, including a bicycle ride and a half-marathon, are scheduled for Saturday as part of the opening.



View photos

Fun opening for Chisholm Trail Parkway

Several community events are planned to celebrate the opening of Chisholm Trail Parkway.

- On Saturday, residents can ride their bicycles, run or walk on the toll road before it opens to traffic.
 - A half-marathon will begin at Farm Road 1902 in Johnson County and end at Edwards Ranch Road in Fort Worth. Participants will be bused from the staging area to the starting line. The route includes open ranchland, as well as an I-20 overpass and a trek through the Clearfork development on the Trinity River's north bank.
 - A 5K race and a 1-mile kids fun run will also be held.
 - Bike rides of 12, 33 and 48 miles will begin and end at Edwards Ranch Road.
 - For registration fees (the proceeds will go to charity) and other information, visit ctprunride.org.
- Sources: North Texas Tollway Authority, Fort Worth and the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce

Getting a TollTag

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For now, Chisholm Trail Parkway looks a bit barren. But more than 5,000 trees will be planted to give it a parkway feel. Planting will take place in the fall, a spokesman said, so the summer heat doesn't kill the trees before their roots settle.

"As we come on line, construction will continue and you will start to see a prettier road emerge," tollway authority spokesman Michael Rey said. "The city of Fort Worth wanted this designed with a parkway feel, so you're going to see some ornamental touches — the fencing, the design. There will be a public artwork element that will come on line later. ... The most important thing is getting the roadway opened and getting people moving."

For supporters, the importance of the opening can't be overstated. Many Fort Worth political and business leaders spent much of their careers trying to get the road built, and several prominent supporters died without ever seeing a shovel turned on the project.

By opening the Chisholm Trail Parkway in May, the North Texas Tollway Authority hopes to fulfill a promise made to the region in fall 2011: that the road would open as soon as possible, even if not all of it was ready.

The agency also typically has a commitment with its bondholders to open new roads to traffic as soon as is practical, to ensure that no time is wasted repaying the debt.

The Plano-based tollway authority took the lead in building the \$1.6 billion project, although Fort Worth, the Texas Department of Transportation and the federal government chipped in to cover construction and right of way.

It took more than a decade of tense, complicated negotiations among those agencies, as well as Union Pacific Railroad — which owns a massive rail yard along the route in west Fort Worth — to ink a construction contract.

Trailblazing approach

Although the tollway authority is more commonly associated with projects in the Dallas area, Tarrant County is no stranger to toll roads.

The region's first toll road, the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike, opened in 1957, connecting Dallas, Arlington and Fort Worth. The road was converted to a freeway in 1977 after its bonds were paid off and is now part of Interstate 30.

Fort Worth also owns part of International Parkway, a toll road that serves as the spine for car travel at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. Fort Worth co-owns the airport with Dallas.

But Chisholm Trail Parkway represents a trailblazing approach for Fort Worth. For one, it's an all-electronic toll road, meaning it has no tollbooths with attendants to make change.

Motorists can sign up for a TollTag account and place a sticker on their windshield so that the cost is deducted automatically as they use the road. Or they can simply allow the tollway authority to photograph their license plate and mail a bill to the car's registered owner, a method called ZipCash.

TollTags are recommended for anyone who will use the road regularly, because ZipCash has a 50 percent higher toll rate.

Unlike with other toll roads, speed won't be the main attraction on parts of Chisholm Trail Parkway. The portion of the road from I-30 to Texas 183 (also known as Southwest Boulevard) is engineered for a 50-mph limit, with winding lanes and other geographic features that ensure the legal posted limit will never go higher.

The lower speed was a concession made to Fort Worth officials. In years of negotiations with historic neighborhoods such as Mistletoe Heights, the city sought to minimize noise and other negative effects from the parkway.

Farther south of the populated areas, the speed limit will increase to 60 mph from Texas 183 to Altamesa Boulevard and to 70 mph from Altamesa Boulevard to U.S. 67 in Cleburne.

Rich history

Planning documents as far back as 1962 show a proposed road cutting through the southwest quadrant of Tarrant County. It was initially called Southwest Freeway, followed by Southwest Parkway.

In the early 2000s, Johnson County officials named their part of the road Chisholm Trail Parkway, a tribute to the cattle trails in the area that connected Texas ranchers to Oklahoma, Kansas and beyond.

- TollTags are stickers placed on windshields that allow the cost to be deducted automatically as a driver travels on North Texas toll roads.

- If a vehicle doesn't have a TollTag, its license plate will be photographed and the bill will be sent to the registered owner. Motorists who use this method, known as ZipCash, will be charged toll rates 50 percent higher than those with TollTags.

- TollTags require an upfront deposit, usually \$40. Most account holders use a credit card to automatically replenish their accounts whenever the balance dips below \$10.

- To apply for a TollTag, visit NTTA.org or call 972-818-6882.

Source: North Texas Tollway Authority

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Eventually, Tarrant County officials and state legislators agreed to call the entire corridor Chisholm Trail Parkway.

As for why the road took 50 years to build — it simply fell through the cracks.

As Fort Worth grew outward over the decades, other road projects took priority. While DFW Airport was under construction in the 1960s, state officials realized they needed better roads not only to help travelers reach the terminals but also to help thousands of workers get to their airport-related jobs.

So money was spent on highways such as Texas 26 and Texas 121/183 in Northeast Tarrant County, a review of highway expenditures from that era shows.

Desperate for a funding source, Fort Worth officials agreed in the 1990s to begin exploring a toll road project in southwest Fort Worth.

For many residents, the prospect of tolls was a bitter pill to swallow, and neighborhoods such as Mistletoe Heights, Berkeley Place, Park Palisades and Hulen Bend Estates loudly voiced concerns about the impact of cutting a wide road through areas that had been settled for more than a century.

But a few city political and business leaders stuck with the proposal. They negotiated, compromised and tugged on the coattails of decision-makers, refusing to quit until either they died or the road got built.

Many officials who plan to attend the festivities Saturday credit former Fort Worth Councilman Chuck Silcox, who died in 2008. The project was his priority throughout his 17 years in office.

Other fierce supporters include Donna Parker, 69, who, along with the late Freese and Nichols executive Joe Paul Jones and the late car dealer Charlie Hillard, worked tirelessly on the project as part of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce's transportation committee during three of those five decades.

"We were like the Three Musketeers. Now I'm the only one alive," said Parker, director of client relations and development at the Jacobs consulting firm.

Parker is looking forward to the public events before the road opens, including a chamber breakfast on the roadway Friday and a half-marathon and bicycle run Saturday.

But she also looks forward to a moment of solitude, driving on Chisholm Trail Parkway alone after the bunting is removed and it's just a road.

"I can't wait to drive it in my personal car," she said, "and see how it links us together."

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