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New toll road expected to bring growth to Cleburne

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BY BILL HANNA
billhanna@star-telegram.com

CLEBURNE — As a resident of Frisco in the 1990s, Cleburne Mayor Scott Cain has experienced rapid growth firsthand.

In the early 1990s, Frisco was a sleepy town of 6,141 with few restaurants or businesses.

“There wasn’t even a McDonald’s,” Cain said.

In the next five years, he watched Frisco begin its transformation into one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S. Helped by the extension of the Dallas North Tollway, which arrived in Frisco in 2004 and was expanded north to U.S. 380 three years later, Frisco has ballooned to a whopping 131,000, according to the Census Bureau.

Cain believes that history is about to repeat itself.

Sometime in the middle of next year, the 28-mile [Chisholm Trail Parkway](#) will open, providing a direct link between Cleburne and downtown Fort Worth.

For now, the toll road entrance in Cleburne is surrounded by farmland with a few cows grazing. Other than the tollway bridges under construction, there is little activity but the traffic passing by on U.S. 67.

The \$1.6 billion project, which has been discussed for more than 40 years, will be six lanes through most of Fort Worth but will drop to four lanes from Altamesa Boulevard to Farm Road 1187, then to two lanes for the final 13 miles to Cleburne.

Officials say it will serve as a catalyst for growth in [Cleburne](#) and [Johnson County](#).

“I think it’s going to be biggest change to our county since the railroad came to Cleburne,” [Johnson County Judge Roger Harmon](#) said, referring to 1881.

A 2011 study by consulting firm Research and Demographic Solutions projected that Cleburne will grow from its current population of 29,344 to 42,262 by 2020 and to 53,146 by 2035. The North Central Texas Council of Governments’ projections are slightly more conservative, predicting 40,162 by 2020 and 48,389 by 2035.

Though some may bemoan the increased traffic that the toll road will bring, Cain said, the city needs to be prepared for what’s coming.

“We’re going to change whether we want to or not,” Cain said. “So the question is how are we going to change?”

Rewriting master plan

There are lessons to be learned from how other cities have coped with growth. Cain said Cleburne would be wise to look at how Mansfield has managed its growth, especially because its school district boomed over the last decade. He also said McKinney’s ability to maintain its historic character in the face of unprecedented growth is something Cleburne should mimic.



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While Cain doesn't expect Cleburne's growth to be anywhere near the pace of Frisco's, he wants to do things a little differently.

"We missed a golden opportunity when I lived in Frisco," Cain said. "... What they didn't do was plan to maintain the small-town feel. Frisco is just another suburban area now. Now it's nice, but it's just another suburb."

With that mind, Cleburne is rewriting its master plan, updating its city charter and reviewing all ordinances. Cain also traveled to Las Vegas this spring to meet with developers and retailers.

It will take more than simply opening the tollway to bring hordes of new residents and businesses, said Steve Murdock, a professor at Rice University who is a former state demographer and U.S. Census Bureau director.

"Access is important, but there has to be something to have access to," Murdock said. "In general, it is going to be other activities that drive growth."

Bringing Cleburne within "the one-hour window" of commuting time is important, Murdock said, because that is the cutoff for most commuters.

It now takes close to an hour to get to Cleburne from downtown Fort Worth, via Interstate 35W and Texas 174, a road packed with traffic lights. Once the Chisholm Trail Parkway opens, that time should be cut in half.

"Right now with no traffic, it's 50 to 55 minutes," Cain said. "If there is any traffic, it can be anywhere from an hour to an hour and 20 minutes."

A building boom?

If Cleburne is going to grow, more home builders must bet on the area.

While some like Harmon, the county judge, believe that large home builders will come to Cleburne, such developers historically stayed away from the area.

That may be changing.

Jeff Patterson, who owns Cleburne-based [Raintree Homes](#) with two brothers and his father, said they've had inquiries about their subdivision, Belle Meadows.

"We've had two real estate agents just recently representing someone who doesn't want to be identified asking about buying the entire subdivision," Patterson said. "Before ..., we never got those types of call, so there's some type of interest."

Patterson said he believes that a building boom is on the horizon, but predicting when it will begin is difficult. Some say it could happen in two to five years; others say longer.

"We don't know if it will be a week, a month, a year or three years after it opens," Patterson said.

One thing that has changed in Cleburne is the attitude of residents toward outsiders, Patterson said. When the home-building business started in 1999, not being a Cleburne native mattered when dealing with local government and businesses.

"That mentality has changed quite a bit," Patterson said. "It's like night and day."

Cleburne native Grady Easdon is ready for a wave of newcomers. He's also tired of driving to Burleson to eat in a restaurant.

"It cannot get here soon enough to suit me," Easdon said. "I just want to see Cleburne develop a little more and have a few more options."

Bond elections possible

If families are going to move to the area, the Cleburne school district must improve, Easdon said.

[Cleburne High School](#) was rated academically unacceptable in the 2011 state accountability ratings and six of the district's eight elementary schools failed to meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks in 2012, according to the Texas Education Agency.

Comments on Cain's [Facebook](#) page also emphasize the need for improving the diverse school district, which counts 50 percent of its students Anglo, 42 percent Hispanic and 4 percent African-American.

Both the city and Cleburne school district officials are contemplating bond packages. The district is waiting for a consultant's study to be completed before making any decisions, but Superintendent Tim Miller said the district will likely take a bond package to the voters in the spring or fall of 2014.

"I think over the last four years we've been improving," Miller said. "We've been able to recruit some fantastic teachers."

Mayor Cain said the city will likely hold off on taking anything to voters if the school bond package goes forward. But he said the city needs to attract jobs. If the school district doesn't move forward with a bond package, Cain said, he will consider presenting voters a proposal to dedicate a portion of the city's sales



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tax for economic development, as Mansfield has done.

Since 2005, the Mansfield Economic Development Corp. has used the half-cent sales tax to invest about \$8.3 million that has attracted 3,112 jobs and \$221 million in new capital investment, said Scott Welmaker, Mansfield's director of economic development. The projects have been primarily industrial.

Welmaker said the Mansfield school district, which has a much larger footprint than the city, has also helped fuel much of the growth. In 2001-02, it had 14,937 students and one high school. Last year it had grown to 33,002 students and five high schools, plus it has a career tech academy and an alternative education center.

Welmaker said there is no reason Cleburne shouldn't see growth once the toll road opens. He expects Cleburne to benefit as more growth comes to the southern part of the Metroplex.

"I'm an optimist," Welmaker said. "We'll see similar growth to what Collin County has seen between [Texas] 360 and [Texas] 121 in Johnson, Ellis and southern Tarrant County. I don't see any reason the southern part of the Metroplex won't fill in at some point."

Cleburne has also tried to bring more attractions downtown.

The city agreed to take over management of the county-owned [Market Square](#) and will try to entice farmers and tourists back to downtown and also plans to host festivals and concerts. Though downtown has the Liberty Hotel and the Johnson County Courthouse, there are few other attractions.

Cain would also like to see more improvements to Buffalo Creek along the edge of downtown to create a mini riverwalk, but funding such a project may not be easy. There are also empty storefronts around the courthouse square.

Closer to where the toll road will end on the northwestern edge of Cleburne, businesses are anticipating it will improve their bottom line.

At [Lone Star Ranch and Outdoors](#), the future tollway sits just outside the front door.

"It's not going to be immediate, but it's going to have a big impact for us," said Robby Cook, a company spokesman. Cook has already been through a population explosion when he was in Highland Village in Denton County.

Although Cook is excited about the development that will follow the tollway, he isn't ready for the increased traffic.

"I lived through it, I drove through it, but I really don't look forward to it," Cook said. "But you can't stop progress."

Bill Hanna, 817-390-7698 Twitter: [@fwhanna](#)

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