

Major Arlington thoroughfares involved in “turn-back” program

Posted Sunday, Aug. 25, 2013

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ARLINGTON — Four major thoroughfares in Arlington would be turned over to the city for maintenance and repair by the Texas Transportation Commission if the agency continues with its proposed plan to “turn back” urban highways to local governments as part of a cost-cutting effort.

All of Farm Road 157, from the southern to the northern city limits, taking in the southern section of Cooper and the northern portion of Collins streets, would be transferred to the city as well as all of U.S. 80, or Division Street, as it cuts across town from the east to the west.

Spur 303, or Pioneer Parkway, from the east to west city limits, would become the responsibility of the city, too, under the controversial plan quietly unveiled by the commission in June.

In all, that would be almost 35 miles of roadway, according to Keith Melton, Arlington’s director of Public Works and Transportation. He couldn’t estimate Friday how much additional cost there would be to the city.

“This would be quite an addition to our street network,” Melton said. “We have about 3,000 lane miles of roads, and this would represent about an additional 204 lane miles.”

Mayor Robert Cluck said the city will fight what he called an unfunded mandate.

“It would be devastating to the city,” Cluck said. “It’s not our fault they are short of money. For them to turn to cities and say ‘OK, it’s yours,’ is absolutely not right.”

The commission is looking for more money to build new roads and maintain the rest of the 80,000-mile state highway system. It has said that by ceding control of what it calls essentially urban state roads, it would save the agency \$165 million a year.

In Fort Worth, the move could add up to 300 lane miles — or about 80 miles — to the amount of roads added to the city’s responsibilities, Mayor Betsy Price said. Parts of Camp Bowie Boulevard and West Rosedale Street would be among the sections of road turned over by the state.

Officials from Arlington and Fort Worth will be joined by others across the state in going to Austin next week to testify before the commission about the proposal.

TxDOT Executive Director Phil Wilson, in a letter to Cluck late last week, said that there has been a lot of misinformation about the turn-back program. He stressed that the commission intends to discuss, but not act, on the proposal. But he added it is an idea worth discussing.

“It is healthy to have a robust conversation about this proposal and to discuss the responsibility of the state transportation agency as it relates to these city roads,” Wilson wrote. “I look forward to direct and productive conversations with you centered on the facts and possibilities of the turn-back program....”

Local control

The idea was originally brought up at a commission meeting in June. Officials said that while the \$165 million savings represents less than 2 percent of their annual spending, the idea made sense.

At one time, the roads being considered were vital statewide links connecting cities and regions, while now they primarily serve residents seeking a way to get through their communities.

For example, U.S. 80 originally was a part of the Bankhead Highway, the first coast-to-coast route extending across the southern United States. Today, the road is called Division in Arlington, Main Street in Garland and East Lancaster Avenue and Camp Bowie in Fort Worth.

While the interstate highway system has replaced the Bankhead as the major connector in the state and region, U.S. 80 is a vital corridor within those cities.

So, it only makes sense for cities to take control of those roads so they can make decisions about how to best maintain them, state officials argue.

“A lot of these roads under consideration have come to serve the local communities more than being state thoroughfares,” said David Glessner, a TxDOT spokesman. “There would be some benefit for taking them on. A transfer of a road would allow them to have control of traffic flow, parking, speed limits. ... The city has a better idea, rather than someone in Austin, on how to allow for maintenance or repair.”

If the roads are turned over, Wilson assured Cluck in his letter that the state “will ensure these roads are in good condition before making the transfer” and that the agency “will work with each city to accommodate its planning cycle and budgets in the future.”

Wilson in his letter also pointed out that the turn-back initiative was discussed before lawmakers imposed cost-saving requirements on the agency during the third legislative special session that ended in August.

TxDOT had estimated the state’s transportation needs at \$4 billion a year — \$1 billion for maintenance and \$3 billion for mobility projects.

Lawmakers eventually put a constitutional amendment on the November ballot that, if approved, would allow \$1.2 billion in oil and gas revenues to be taken from what is known as the rainy-day fund and devoted to road construction and maintenance. Estimates put the amount going to the highway fund at \$1 billion a year.

At the same time lawmakers said the agency must trim \$100 million out of its budget and use it to pay down debt built up in recent years. Wilson said that must come from internal operations and not at the expense of reducing construction and maintenance programs.

Unclear message

There has been some confusion about the turn-back program.

Initially, city staff told the Arlington City Council on Tuesday that they were not aware of any roadways that would be affected by the program.

The next day the city was told by TxDOT that Tarrant County had been inadvertently omitted from the list of targeted roadways, said Jennifer Wichmann, assistant director of management resources.

Then the calculations of the mileage of the streets being considered were different, Melton said. The state said the city could get back 25.7 miles of roadway on the list, while the city calculations say it is about 34.75 miles.

No matter what the exact figures are, Councilwoman Lana Wolff said Arlington is already working to increase spending on street maintenance for its own 3,000 lane miles of roadway.

Adding the state highways would take away from much-needed city street repairs.

“I don’t see how they can just spring this on us,” Wolff said. “I understand where they are coming from but they need to recognize we have worked diligently to address our maintenance issues. This really caught me off-guard.”

Staff writers Susan Schrock and Scott Nishimura contributed to this report, which contains material from the Star-Telegram archives.

ARLINGTON TURNBACK THOROUGHFARES

FM 157 - Cooper Street from the southern city limit to Division Street, then Collins Street from Division to the northern city limit - 15.53 miles

Highway 80 - Division Street within the city limits - 9.54 miles

Spur 303 - Pioneer Parkway within the city limits - 9.68 miles

Source: City of Arlington

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