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Private Toll Road Considered to Counter Population Boom

By AMAN BATHEJA JUNE 12, 2014

Facing traffic congestion that is only expected to get worse, officials in North Texas are weighing a proposal to build a toll road for commuters into Dallas. The Texas Turnpike Corporation of Dallas has proposed a private toll road, the only of its kind in the state, connecting Greenville and Wylie, and local transportation officials say they are keeping an open mind.

“This would be a private-sector company that would 100 percent finance the project,” said Tom Shelton, a senior program manager with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, which coordinates the region’s transportation planning. “As a result, they would take 100 percent of the risk, and they would take 100 percent of the benefits.”

The council is studying the toll road proposal as part of its review of transportation options for the Blacklands Corridor, which includes parts of Dallas, Collin, Rockwall and Hunt counties. Thousands of residents from the Greenville area regularly drive the 50 miles to Dallas along Interstate 30.

With the corridor’s population projected to grow significantly over the next 20 years, local officials are hoping to expand the transportation options before congestion worsens. Building a highway will probably be among the recommendations issued later this year, Mr. Shelton said, and the Texas Turnpike Corporation’s proposal is drawing interest. (The Texas

Turnpike Corporation has been a corporate sponsor of The Texas Tribune.)

Any road, however, is years away. A private road would have to be approved by the Texas Department of Transportation and comply with regional regulations, including how to set tolls, Mr. Shelton said. In addition, the corporation would need to acquire the land.

The possible route of the Blacklands toll road has already drawn some opposition from rural residents. Neal Barker, an infrastructure project developer who serves on the corporation's board of directors, said that if allowed to move forward, the company would work to avoid displacing residents and use eminent domain only as a last resort. Requests for comment from those behind a website opposed to the project were not returned.

In the early part of the last century, private toll roads were more common in Texas. Since then, every private toll road has either closed or was acquired by the state or another public entity. In 1991, state lawmakers repealed a law that allowed for the creation of private toll road corporations and that gave them the power of eminent domain. The Texas Turnpike Corporation, however, started one day before the repeal of the law was enacted, according to the Texas Department of Transportation.

Since then, Mr. Barker said, the company has been looking for a Texas road project in which a market opportunity exists but public entities are ill-equipped to address on their own.

Over the last decade, as state and federal transportation funding has dropped, communities across Texas have increasingly turned to tolling to fund highway projects. The state is now home to more than 20 toll facilities, with more in development.

Texas has long encouraged public-private partnerships in transportation projects, most notably the southern leg of State Highway 130 from Austin to Seguin, which opened in 2012. A private consortium designed and built the road and agreed to operate and maintain it for 50 years in exchange for a cut of the revenue. The consortium, however, does

not own the land.

Neil Gray, director of government affairs for the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, said he could only think of one other entirely private toll road in the country: the Dulles Greenway in Virginia, which opened in 1995. “They’re very rare animals,” he said. “Typically, the issue with the private toll road is acquiring the land on which to build it.”

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