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North Tarrant Express toll lanes open Saturday

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HURST — -- For some motorists, it's the ultimate expression of capitalism. For others, it's tantamount to highway robbery.

Either way, the era of congestion pricing has arrived in Tarrant County.

A \$2.5 billion makeover of Loop 820 and Texas 121/183 officially ends Saturday, when the final portion — the toll lanes, with prices that can change at a moment's notice based on congestion — opens to traffic.

The project, known as North Tarrant Express, is wrapping up nine months ahead of schedule. Ribbon-cuttings and other public events are planned this weekend in the cities along the 13-mile corridor, including north Fort Worth, Haltom City, North Richland Hills, Hurst, Bedford and Euless.

The main lanes and frontage roads are already open, and the toll lanes — two in each direction — will open Saturday afternoon, after the festivities, officials said.

It's a big moment for residents of those cities. For decades, they fought congestion on the 13-mile stretch. And for the past four years, they have endured one of the largest, most congested and most complicated work zones in North Texas history.

But for commuters, the opening of North Tarrant Express signals the dawn of a new era — one in which the price for traveling on a toll road changes based on traffic conditions. The worse the congestion in the toll-free lanes, the higher the cost to whiz right by in one of the toll lanes.

The idea is to encourage pass-through traffic to use the toll lanes while leaving the free lanes and frontage roads for motorists traveling shorter distances, said Robert Hinkle, spokesman for NTE Mobility Partners, the firm that oversaw the project and will manage the toll lanes.

"What they [the toll lanes] are actually designed for is to take that commuter traffic, those folks who have no reason to stop in north Fort Worth, Haltom City, NRH, Hurst, Bedford or Euless. They're just trying to get to DFW Airport or north Dallas or going west to Abilene or even New Mexico. They're just trying to get through the corridor," Hinkle said.

"If you live in NRH and you're going to your favorite restaurant in Bedford, the managed lanes are not going to be anything you're going to use. You're going to use those brand-new main highway lanes. You're going to use those brand-new expanded frontage roads."

Those who can't or don't want to pay tolls can remain in the toll-free lanes, which will handle traffic much better than before they were rebuilt but will likely be congested during peak travel periods.

How tolls work

For the first six months, traffic in the toll lanes will be monitored on a trial basis. The contractor, which will control the tolls for 52 years, will publish its toll rates weekly at NTETExpress.com. Until early April, the rates will vary hour by hour according to the published schedule.

During peak periods, the rates will typically vary from 30 to 75 cents per mile. For example, a motorist who enters the toll lanes at Loop 820 and travels east at 7 a.m. on Wednesday of the first week can expect to pay \$3.90 if the motorist travels the 13-mile length of the corridor.

Rates are lower during off-peak times, ranging from 10 to 25 cents per mile. A motorist who travels the whole corridor at 3 a.m. Wednesday will be charged \$1.50.

After the first six months, the contractor will be able to change the tolls minute by minute, using highway cameras and road sensors to determine how traffic is moving.

The contractor will be free to charge whatever the market will bear — up to a point. NTE Mobility Partners generally must abide by a policy passed by the Regional Transportation Council nearly a decade ago that caps tolls at 75 cents per mile, said Amanda Wilson, spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Wilson referred to it as a "soft cap."

"They've got performance triggers that would send them above that for short periods of time, but generally it won't be above 75 cents," she said.

NTE Mobility Partners does not need permission from the Texas Department of Transportation or the council of governments to raise the rates, although those agencies will regularly monitor prices, officials said.

The goal is to set the price so that a limited number of vehicles use the toll lanes. That way, motorists who pay to use the toll lanes can enjoy a minimum average speed of 50 mph, Hinkle said.

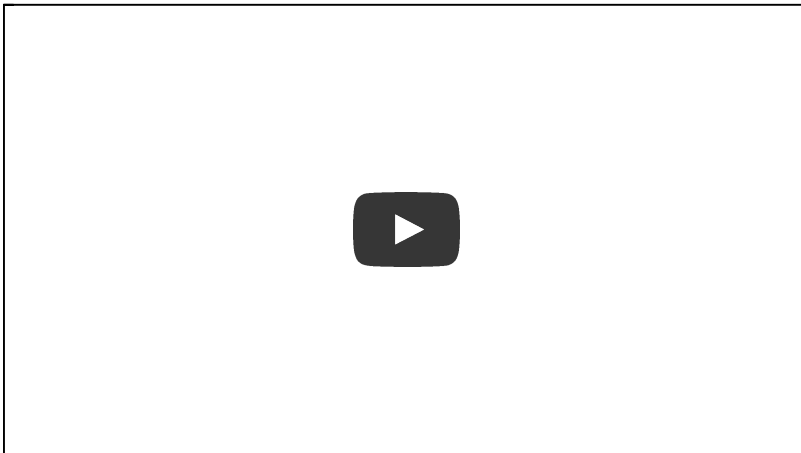
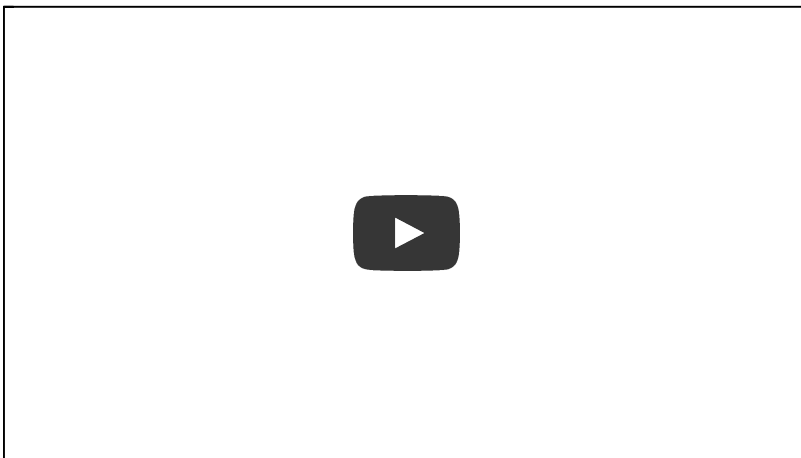
Returning traffic

For many years, the Loop 820/Airport Freeway corridor has been among the busiest and most congested in Tarrant County.

As recently as 2009, 184,419 vehicles per day used Texas 121/183 in Bedford, according to a Transportation Department traffic count conducted near Central Drive, just before construction began on North Tarrant Express.

During construction, about a fourth of the traffic disappeared as motorists sought shortcuts on smaller highways such as Texas 10 and city streets such as Mid-Cities Boulevard, Hinkle said.

"As we finish up construction and we've put the last layer of asphalt out on the general-purpose lanes, we've started to see traffic come back into the corridor," he said. "As we've begun to see people come back, we don't think it's going to take long for people to figure out how to use the east and west managed lanes, the TEXpress lanes."



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