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Wylie, Collin County partner to meet growing transportation needs

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WYLIE — In the fading twilight, homeward-bound traffic stretches out along State Highway 78 and FM544 in long, bright ribbons.

The traffic is testimony to Wylie's rapid growth. Its population has roughly tripled since 2000 — from 15,132 to an estimated 44,575 in 2013. But as the numbers grow, so do transportation needs. And that has been a challenge.

"We have a capital improvement plan with a 10-year window, and obviously that's dependent on funding," said Chris Holsted, Wylie's city engineer. "It's pretty much up to the cities and counties. Fortunately, we have a great partnership with Collin County and there are a lot of roads that wouldn't have been built without the county."

He points to Stone Road — FM544 east of Highway 78 and a key artery into eastern Wylie — as an example.

"Our future growth is on the east side of 78, so we're building that out," Holsted said.

On the west side of Highway 78, Woodbridge Parkway opened just a few weeks ago, a new connection between 78 and FM544. The county was part of that project as well.

Still, the commute to and from Wylie is a busy one.

FM544 is six lanes through Wylie. For most of the day, that's plenty to handle business and shopping traffic.

"But you definitely see a peak demand heading westbound in the morning and back east in the evening," Holsted said.

The city of Wylie was an early opponent of plans by the private Texas Turnpike Corp. to build a toll road — the Northeast Gateway — between Bush Turnpike in the Garland-Rowlett area and Interstate 30 near Greenville in Hunt County.

The final route for the proposed toll road hadn't been set before regional planners dropped it from its list of projects. But for some in Wylie, particularly in the southeastern part of the city, there was hope that the road would provide another route to jobs in Dallas, Richardson and other employment centers.

While Holsted said it could have made "some difference, possibly" for people living in one corner of town, "for most it's just easier to take Highway 78."

Craig Kelly, the city's public information officer, called the proposed toll road "something of a challenge" for Wylie.

"With limited access, how much traffic was it going to take off 78?" he asked.

"I believe that in its last statement and resolution [on the toll road plan], the City Council and city management recognized the need for a solution" to rush-hour congestion, Kelly said. "But the private toll road might not have been it."

As a state road, Highway 78 falls under TxDOT jurisdiction, and the Department of Transportation is deep into two adjoining projects widening the highway from two to six lanes from Spring Creek Parkway near Wylie’s northeastern edge to FM205 in Lavon and north to FM6, which connects with the small Collin County town of Nevada.

“We’re about halfway done with both of those projects,” said Barry Heard, TxDOT’s area engineer for Collin County. “They should be ready in two or three months.”

The agency has also done rehab work on several other farm-to-market roads near Wylie, he said.

“As far as actual capacity projects, no, but we’ve done a lot of maintenance work on those over the last three years, like adding shoulders” to the two-lane roads, Heard said.

Clarence Daugherty, Collin County’s director of engineering, said cooperative projects involving the cities, county and state will be critical in meeting transportation needs.

“The county just adopted an update to our mobility plan, but we’re hearing projections about the population that are even higher in the long term than we have in the study,” Daugherty said. “So the county really needs to look at our build-out population, which is well over 2 million people, and determine what the transportation system needs to look like to handle that.”

In major projects involving the state — widening and rebuilding portions of U.S. Highway 75 in Allen and McKinney, for example — the county helps cities meet their share of costs, he said. In other cases, cities or the county might take on a greater portion of a state project “to move it along faster ... like selecting an engineer and managing the design work.”

“And when you describe what’s going on in Wylie, you’re describing the rest of the county, too,” Daugherty said. “I think some members of the Commissioners Court are seeing that there might be even more the county can do to help fill the gaps.”

With strong growth in cities along the U.S. Highway 380 corridor and other major roads, county officials are working to anticipate and meet future needs.

“But then we back up and make sure the things we’re doing today and tomorrow are good steps toward meeting that growth so we have a better chance of keeping up,” Daugherty said.

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