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Transportation

Highway name games saddle Dallas-Fort Worth corridors with multiple monikers

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Every weekday during rush hour, thousands of downtown Dallas drivers slowly snake through the southbound lanes of Interstate 35E, Stemmons Freeway, the Mixmaster and Purple Heart Trail Highway.

But if that sounds like there's a traffic jam on four highways, don't kid yourself. All four are names for the stretch of road just west of downtown Dallas. And I-35E is far from alone in North Texas when it comes to monikers.

With a handful of exceptions — like Dallas North Tollway and U.S. Highway 80 — most major highways are numerical state or federal designations and the name of a politician, sports legend, developer or civic leader. Others are the corridors, like U.S. Highway 67 and Interstate 30, that have more than one honoree.

And the region's predilection for pseudonyms doesn't stop there.

Segments of some highways are better known by the nicknames bestowed upon their interchanges with other freeways, like the High Five intersection of Central Expressway and LBJ Freeway. And if the stack of titles wasn't high enough, go ahead and add the brand names given to ongoing highway construction work.

That includes the Horseshoe project that's updating the Mixmaster and part of the Canyon. All three are names for the interchange of I-35E and Interstate 30. Both of those highways are named for R.L. Thornton south and east of downtown, respectively. But I-35E is called Stemmons north of downtown, while I-30 is Tom Landry Highway west of downtown.



Just don't forget that the Horseshoe is really a first-phase breakout of the larger Project Pegasus redo involving that same interchange.

Confused yet? You're probably not alone. And likely not the only person who doesn't know if the Julius Schepps traffic jam mentioned on the radio is going to affect you because you don't know where that is. (Spoiler alert: They're talking about Interstate 45.)

Houston-based author and highway enthusiast Oscar Slotboom said that over the course of decades, the region has taken its knack for nicknames to a new level in Texas.

"It's just a preference for names that sets Dallas apart," said Slotboom, who wrote the 2014 book *Dallas-Fort Worth Freeways: Texas-Sized Ambition*.

'Up to lawmakers'

If you're perplexed, don't blame the Texas Department of Transportation's naming division. Because there's not one. Beyond the numerical designations from bureaucratic agencies, highway names are decided by politicians. In the early days of highway building, that largely meant city councils. But now it's done by the Texas Legislature.

"It's all up to lawmakers," said Tony Hartzel, a TxDOT spokesman. "We just follow the legislation."

The state transportation agency uses the numerical designations when referring to highways. Most of the time. LBJ Freeway is a much more common reference than Interstate 635. And who calls Woodall Rodgers Freeway by its Spur 366 designation?

So with all these monikers piling up, who decides what the proper (or at least the common) name is? Turns out, we all do, albeit inadvertently.

"There really isn't a playbook for this," Hartzel said. "It could be whatever the locals want to call it. And if it becomes part of the vernacular, that's what it becomes."

Names of yore

Some of the names attached to our infrastructure require no introduction. Because this is Texas, there aren't a lot of questions about who Lyndon B. Johnson or George H.W. Bush are. The same goes for Tom Landry, even if he was never president.

But that's not true for a lot of names we drive on every day.

Leslie Stemmons, who I-35E north of downtown is named for, is credited with developing the modern-day Trinity River levee system and the industrial district around it and Riverfront Boulevard. In his book, Slotboom details how the Stemmons family was influential in putting together land needed for the planned I-35E. He said that soon after officials named the highway for Stemmons, the developer donated the land needed for the thoroughfare.

C.F. Hawm, whose name graces U.S. Highway 175, was a former state highway commissioner and lumber executive. John Carpenter, of State Highways 114 and 183 fame, was the father of what became Las Colinas in Irving. Woodall Rodgers and R.L. Thornton were mayors of Dallas. But don't feel like an uninformed North Texan if you didn't know any of that.

"As time passes, no one knows who they are," Slotboom said.

Ongoing projects

Names aren't the only labels slapped on highways. The Diamond Interchange is the official name for the area where State Highways 114, 183 and Loop 12 intersect in Irving. Farther north, the stretch of road where State Highways 114 and 121 intersect was dubbed the DFW Connector.

The Mixmaster is where I-35E meets Woodall Rodgers and I-30. The Canyon is where I-30 runs south of downtown Dallas.



Michael Hogue/Staff Illustrator



Leslie Stemmons



Woodall Rodgers

Several of the area’s ongoing construction projects also have their own nicknames. Midtown Express is the name for improvements being made to SH 114, SH 183 and Loop 12. But once that project’s done, Midtown Express will be the name for the new managed toll lanes that run through the middle of SH 183, also known as Airport Freeway.

Southern Gateway is what officials call the redo of I-35E and U.S. Highway 67 south of downtown. That latter highway already sports several names. Part of it is named after former Dallas County commissioner Marvin D. Love. Duncanville named its section after chamber of commerce member S.G. Alexander. Cedar Hill’s portion is named for J. Elmer Weaver, a civic leader from that city.

“They really like to name freeways after people so much, they name them after multiple people,” Slotboom said. “It’s just a Dallas thing.”

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Doug Defferari

5 days ago

 The one that makes absolutely no sense is the Dallas North Tollway. It was named North Tollway when north of Dallas was 635. Last I checked it goes a little further north now. So if you're not from here and you see Dallas North Tollway South? How about just Dallas Tollway? Or does that make too much sense??

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 **Mark Whatley** 5 days ago
Eliminate the practice of naming freeways after people.

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 **enerjazz** 5 days ago
I second that motion.

Reply Share 4 0

 **Henry** 5 days ago
Politicians love to name freeways after themselves. It is all so much of the rich good ole boy game in Texas.

Reply Share 5 0

 **J and J Home** 5 days ago
The DMN runs a similar story to this about once every decade. Must have been a slow news day.

Reply Share 0 3

 **Georgana Davis** 6 days ago
No highway or road should be named after Bush. He is not a Texan!

Reply Share 1 2

 **Erich Anderson** 7 days ago
This is a source of confusion when giving driving directions to out-of-townners. I remember when I moved here about 30 years ago, my father told me to turn North at Stemmons Freeway; "they'll be a sign" he assured me. There isn't, of course, and I was almost in Mesquite before I realized I had missed my turn. The mixmaster used to have an exit for "central expressway" that would dump you off in the sketchy part of downtown. All the locals know the freeways by their names, but almost all the signage (and maps) use the road's numerical name. And don't get me started on "East Northwest Highway", the dumbest street name ever.

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 **Tom Lemons** 7 days ago
Wait until you try to explain where "Beltline" is - or Green Oaks in Mid-Cities.

Reply Share 1 0

 **Babette Barrows** 19 hours ago
I had the same problem in 1985 when I moved here. People would tell me to take Stemmons or Central or Central Expressway or Marvin D Love Freeway.....I would say now what number is that! Finally got a Mapsco and would get a new one every other year. It is very confusing for people who move into this area! Glad to know I wasn't alone!

Reply Share 0 0

 **Ray Hill** 7 days ago
And most recent addition is the new tag on part of Central in Dallas naming it for George W