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## Proposed toll road in Blacklands Corridor to be discussed

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Published: 31 August 2014 11:04 PM

Updated: 31 August 2014 11:47 PM

Residents in the Blacklands Corridor of eastern Collin and Hunt counties will have their chance to speak this week on recommendations for major transportation projects, including a controversial private toll road project linking the Bush Turnpike with Wylie and Greenville.

The North Central Texas Council of Governments will present its recommendations at a public meeting Thursday in Lavon.

Among the recommended projects are improvements to Interstate 30 — reducing traffic bottlenecks in the short term and eventually reconstructing the highway.

But the most immediate project is the toll road, now called the Northeast Gateway project. It's designed to take some of the traffic from I-30 and busy State Highway 78 and do it quickly. Dallas-based Texas Turnpike Corp., the company behind the toll road idea, said construction could begin as soon as 2015.

Texas Turnpike officials say the project makes financial sense and meets a need as regional growth pushes north and east. The anticipated price tag, according to project manager and Texas Turnpike vice president Neal Barker, is less than \$500 million.

But there still are issues to resolve.

When the toll road idea was first broached, it would have followed the NETEX rail right-of-way between Wylie and Greenville. But the North Central Texas Council of Governments said that right of way, the old Cotton Belt line, had to be preserved for possible rail uses.

And state regulators have told toll road proponents that the route won't include portions of already-busy Highway 78 and won't take in any of State Highway 69 on the west side of Greenville, Barker said.

"We need to go directly to I-30," he said.

But before revised plans are completed, residents will have plenty of opportunity to ask questions, he said.

"We have the [council of governments] meeting, and then we'll have our own meetings in November. I think it's important to note that we'll be meeting on both sides of the project — so we'll have a meeting near the western terminus and one on the east," Barker said.

Early next year, the turnpike corporation will hold public hearings, again east and west, to present a final route, he said.

"We're deep in the throes of trying to get all the environmental constraints and all of the potential routes," Barker said. "Then, at the public meeting on Sept. 4, we can say, 'Here are the options and here are a couple that make sense.'"

Hunt County Judge John Horn, who has been a toll road advocate since the beginning, said the Dallas-Fort Worth region has been dealing with challenges from growth for decades. One of the key issues now, he said, centers on I-30, especially as it crosses Lake Ray Hubbard and in the fast-growing towns in Rockwall County.

"I was coming back from a meeting in Arlington," Horn said, "and there was an accident on that bridge, and it shut down. It locks people up."

“We need to have lifelines,” he said. “I-30 improvements need to be done, but we have to open up other routes. And unfortunately, some of the things that come with these are sweet for some and bittersweet for others. But they have to be addressed.”

First on the list is the path the toll road would take. The narrow neck of land separating Lavon Lake and Lake Ray Hubbard is an obvious choice, but Highway 78 already slices through it before turning north to Farmersville. A bridge across the northern arm of Lake Ray Hubbard is another possibility, but it comes with issues of its own.

“We’re still looking at a lot of options,” said Texas Turnpike’s Barker. “There could be options that use public right of way, but until the public weighs in, we don’t know.”

Eventually, if the state approves a mandated environmental process that determines the best route, Texas Turnpike would have to work out an agreement with the North Texas Tollway Authority, which serves seven North Texas counties, including Collin and Dallas.

So far, the NTTA has mostly been monitoring the Blacklands project.

“We’re very early in the process — they’re still doing their environmental reports, so it’s still pretty premature,” said Michael Rey, spokesman for the NTTA. “We’ve monitored it to this point, and when the time comes, we’d have to discuss it further.”

“We’ve met with the NTTA several times over the past 18 months, and we will continue to do so,” Barker said. “We see them as a peer, and we’re working with them to implement the best project for the region.”

The money to finance such a project would seem another issue, but Barker said traffic estimates and revenue projections are promising.

“Over its lifetime, [the toll road] does produce a nice return,” he said. “It’s not a Dallas North Tollway type facility, but it’s a healthy toll road with good traffic.

“It’s financeable.”

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Blacklands Corridor Transportation Meeting

**When:** 6 p.m. Thursday

**Where:** NeSmith Elementary School, 801 Presidents Blvd., Lavon

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