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County lays out guidelines for I-35E

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By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

Denton County commissioners Tuesday approved guidelines to be delivered to the Regional Transportation Council that lay out the county's goals and desires for expanding Interstate 35E.

The guidelines will be considered by the Regional Transportation Council for a resolution to pass onto the Texas Transportation Commission — the latest step in the lengthy process of finding the ways and means to expand the often congested thoroughfare.

“I will ask the RTC to put [the guidelines] into their resolution to the Texas Transportation Commission, which ultimately will influence the process going forward — how the project is constructed and the mechanism with which to finance it,” said Commissioner Andy Eads, who represents Denton County on the Regional Transportation Council.

A committee of transportation representatives, including one from Denton County, has been meeting to determine the best way to go about widening a 28-mile stretch of I-35E from Carrollton to Denton — a requirement of Senate Bill 1420. The bill also authorizes the use of public-private partnerships to fund the expansion project.

The committee has met several times to decide the size and scope of the project as well as the possible ways to finance the work. One of the ways is working with the Regional Transportation Council to appeal to the state's transportation commission.

County commissioners discussed four major points for the guidelines during their meeting Tuesday morning, with the goal of making sure everyone was on board with the guidelines so that Eads completely represented the county before the Regional Transportation Council.

The first guideline is that any managed toll lane revenue should go toward the whole corridor. Then, once the corridor is complete, the revenue should stay in the county of origin in order for Denton and Dallas counties to retain revenue from their respective pieces.

The second guideline is to begin building bridges and service roads across Lewisville Lake that would eventually be part of the expansion project.

The third guideline says the Regional Transportation Council should acknowledge that any regional toll revenue generated in the county cannot be spent without the express authorization of the Denton County Commissioners Court.

The last guideline suggests the Regional Transportation Council ask the Texas Transportation Commission to provide supplemental funding to expand general-purpose freeway lanes in direct proportion to the number of managed toll lane improvements in the initial expansion of I-35E in Denton County.

“These are not new conditions,” Eads told the commissioners. “These are what we have been advocating since the beginning of the project, but they need to be clearly articulated for the resolution.”

Denton County Judge Mary Horn said it was important county officials be specific about how they want the county’s money spent.

“I look to you to state to the members of the RTC [that] we’re appreciative of their support,” she said. “We have an obligation to the citizens of Denton County.”

Transportation consultant John Polster also reiterated a point he has made at previous Commissioners Court meetings that the county needs to be careful in dealings with other agencies.

“As recently as November, one of the transportation commissioners went out of his way to suggest I watch what I say and do, because I am being way too aggressive,” he said. “Everyone in the transportation industry knows Denton County plays for keeps; that’s why we’re ahead of the curve. They understand when something is said genteelly, there is strength behind it.”

Commissioners Ron Marchant and Bobbie Mitchell wondered what the county should do if the Regional Transportation Council members are not on board with the county’s guidelines, but Eads said he didn’t want to focus any attention on that ahead of the Thursday meeting.

“Hopefully the rest of the members of the RTC will acknowledge the county’s unique position and financial investment in this and will agree with our position and goals for the project,” he said.

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