

LOCAL NEWS

Some I-35E requests on hold for now

Regional council won't push for free lanes now, but county is optimistic

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By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

The Regional Transportation Council accepted most of Denton County's requests related to the expansion of Interstate 35E, but some of the county commissioners' requests from last week have been held for now.

Among the requests held was the provision that the project at the start would include a free lane for every managed toll lane.

County Commissioner Andy Eads updated commissioners Tuesday about the project after the RTC considered it last week.

Even though some of Denton County's language was removed from the RTC's resolution, the county is still optimistic about finding more funding and realizing the goal of highway expansion.

"We got a lot of what we wanted and then some," Eads said Tuesday afternoon.

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 Interstate 35E from U.S. Highway 380 in Denton to Interstate 635 in Dallas — 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.

The RTC's resolution will be sent to the Texas Transportation Commission.

County commissioners had asked that revenue earned from the corridor stay in the county where it is earned. They asked for service road bridges across Lewisville Lake to be built sooner.

Commissioners also wanted to stipulate that revenue from managed toll lanes collected in Denton County could not be spent without commissioners' authorization, and that the RTC ask for supplemental funding to add one free lane for each managed toll lane during the initial expansion of I-35E.

"The resolution that was ultimately passed stopped short of articulating that formula for one-for-one," Eads said.

Commissioner Hugh Coleman, who has long championed adding free lanes along with toll lanes, said he was disappointed that provision came out of the resolution, but he felt confident it would be added later.

“As long as we have that, I think we can keep our hands on how this facility is shaped,” Coleman said. “We have to make sure people remember the whole thing needs to be done.”

Eads said Dallas County representatives wanted other language taken out, at least for now, that stated its toll revenue would stay only in the corridor. But Eads said that should not affect revenue collected in Denton County.

Dallas County officials took the language out as they continue to work with TxDOT in Austin to identify funds.

“They articulated in and after the meeting, they’d be OK with that language being re-included,” Eads said, and he expressed confidence that would happen.

“The RTC wanted to give them time to work through the process with TxDOT on funding,” he said. “Just like [Denton County], they’re prioritizing their projects and how [I-35E] fits into that.”

Eads said that overall, county officials accomplished the goals to clearly state their position at Commissioners Court and at the Regional Transportation Council.

“We’re still working with our partners on the RTC, with Dallas County, our cities along the corridor and TxDOT to identify funds as we move forward in the spirit of a true partnership,” Eads said.

He said TxDOT should begin asking firms to submit their qualifications for the project beginning in February or March. The special committee that is reviewing the project also must review recommendations from other firms on how to build the project the most efficiently.

Eads said officials would continue to work with the state, Dallas County and the RTC to figure out what the financial contributions will be to the project.

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