

LOCAL NEWS

Officials want more free lanes on I-35E

Groups talk about drawbacks of scaling back expansion project

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By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

LEWISVILLE — As talk of the expansion of Interstate 35E continues, area elected officials want to be certain project planners are adding free lanes alongside any projected toll lanes.

Representatives from the committee charged with deciding how the massive expansion project will be funded and delivered met Tuesday in Lewisville. Committee members further expanded on a handful of building options and heard feedback from county and state officials who are unwavering on their desire for free lanes.

“I hope they are able to obtain additional financing to provide what was promised during public meetings by TxDOT,” Denton County Commissioner Hugh Coleman said. “I will be watching the proceedings carefully to ensure we don’t get sold down the river.

“I’m still very concerned the committee is proceeding with its plan to only provide managed lanes without providing any additional free lanes,” he added.

The 1420 Committee is a requirement of Senate Bill 1420, which authorizes the use of public-private partnerships to fund the expansion of a 28-mile stretch of I-35E, from Denton to Dallas.

The current highway has four to six regular lanes and four lanes of frontage roads.

The project would expand the highway to eight regular lanes, four tolled HOV lanes and four to six frontage lanes, depending on the need. The project’s current estimated cost is \$3.3 billion in construction, \$1.2 billion to purchase right of way and \$800 million for operations.

Early Tuesday morning in Commissioners Court, Coleman broached the idea of commissioners’ rescinding the resolution supporting the expansion project and the commitment of county dollars — the only tangible money in the project right now, based on what he perceived to be a bait and switch by the Texas Department of Transportation.

While support for the idea went nowhere, it at least spurred discussion on Coleman’s big concern on the project — free general-purpose lanes.

At the last 1420 Committee meeting on Nov. 10, TxDOT officials made it known they lacked the funding to complete the scope of the expansion project as presented to the public. To that end, they proposed a handful of scenarios that included building a managed toll lane.

Coleman wants a free lane for each toll lane and — after a round of spirited discussion among county commissioners — they seemed to be on the same page with Coleman going into the meeting Tuesday afternoon.

Attending the meeting in addition to County Judge Mary Horn, Commissioner Andy Eads and Commissioner Bobbie Mitchell were state Rep. Myra Crownover, R-Denton, Rep. Tan Parker, R-Flower Mound, a representative from the office of Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, Corinth Mayor Paul Ruggiere and Denton Mayor Mark Burroughs.

TxDOT officials presented updates on their expansion ideas that included the toll lanes in various forms and changes to the width of bridges, sidewalks and frontage roads, with the assurance that they were not committed to any particular plan.

When the forum opened for comment, much of the discussion was on the need for free lanes.

Burroughs stressed the need to get the expansion done right, whatever path was taken to deliver it. He also said that because of Denton's growth, it would be a mistake to not address the need for a connection to U.S. Highway 380, even if it meant acquiring the right of way now and then pushing forward when the money was there in the future.

Crownover told the committee the big picture was that I-35E was not just a road for Denton County, but a major artery for the United States.

"This is a one-time shot," she said. "We cannot cut this short; we cannot get it wrong."

Crownover expressed concern over the pace of the project and its effect on the University of North Texas.

"There is no easy answer here, but this is something we have to get right," she said.

Ruggiere, Corinth's mayor, noted a few concerns for the public, suggesting that the committee make it clear to the public that any money generated by a toll lane in the I-35E corridor would stay in the corridor. He also said that if TxDOT is changing how it will approach the project, more public meetings would be held to let residents know about the change and to see if the support is still there.

Nelson's representative read a letter from the longtime senator in which she stated her stance against anything less than what was initially proposed by TxDOT.

Horn read from a letter she drafted and signed along with Eads to send to the Texas Transportation Commission asking for financial help and stressing the importance of the project and the ability to get things done by working together.

She stressed to those at the meeting that the project scope she has in mind has not changed from when she was proposing the project in public meetings months ago. She said it would have to be done in stages and that there was no clear idea of how much money would be needed for the project.

"[But] my scope of work hasn't changed — I am not backing off for an instant," she said.

Michael Morris, chairman of the 1420 Committee and director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said the committee would look at how to meet the desire for free general-purpose lanes financially.

He said that while the committee does not want to move too fast, "at the same time, people are dying on I-35. This committee needs to strike the correct balance on how we get back to the commission and bring some relief to the corridor."

The committee's next meeting is set for 9 a.m. Nov. 30 in the boardroom of the Denton County Transportation Authority, 1660 S. I-35E, Suite 250, in Lewisville.

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