

## Eastern extension of Bush Turnpike opens today, connecting Garland, Sachse, Rowlett



Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer

The Bush Turnpike's eastern extension, set to open Wednesday, crosses part of Lake Ray Hubbard just north of its intersection with Interstate 30.

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The North Texas Tollway Authority will open the 9.9-mile eastern extension of the Bush Turnpike late Wednesday, creating a faster commute for drivers in eastern suburbs and development opportunities for Rowlett and Sachse.

The three-year, \$958 million project extends the tollway from State Highway 78 in Garland, through Sachse and Rowlett, to Interstate 30.

The toll road extension spans Dallas' Lake Ray Hubbard and creates the first highway frontage for both Rowlett and Sachse.

"We will have more direct access to our city for the first time in 43 years," Rowlett Mayor Todd Gottel said. "We have been left behind every time a Best Buy or major retailer comes in. They go to Rockwall or Garland. It's all about access.

"This really changes the face of this city forever."

Rockwall resident Chad Purcell is looking forward to taking an edge off his daily work commute.

"I would say to get from Rockwall to the mall right now takes me 30 minutes," said Purcell, who operates Nestle Toll House Cafe in Firewheel Town Center and also works as a firefighter at a nearby Garland station. "I'd venture to say that at most, it'll be 15 minutes now. In the evenings, you've got a mile-and-a-half or two-mile backup at the mall as it is now."

Sherri Davis lived close to work until her company relocated from Rowlett to southern Plano seven years ago. She now takes advantage of her employer's offer to stagger her workday hours, but still can't completely avoid the rush hour traffic at the current endpoint of the turnpike.

"I am guessing I'll save 10 to 15 minutes both ways," she said.

The new highway has three main lanes in each direction, one main lane gantry for toll processing and six sets of ramp gantries. The average toll for driving on the extension is 15.3 cents per mile for vehicles with an electronic TollTag. It costs 50 percent more for drivers who don't have a TollTag.

The road should be open sometime around 4 or 5 p.m., NTTA officials estimate. Some parts of the project, such as the connection to I-30 frontage roads, will continue through February.

The overpass construction and backup along State Highway 66 in Rowlett — the connection to downtown Rockwall — will persist as NTTA finishes its work. A Rowlett city project to build a connector street from Merritt to Liberty Grove roads won't be finished until the middle of 2013.

### Planned in 1957

The eastern extension is part of the Loop 9/State Highway 190 corridor originally planned in 1957. Garland started actively pursuing the project in the mid-1980s, redefining itself on an undeveloped frontier that it branded "Firewheel" with a golf course and, eventually, the retail center.

"Landowners donated the land with the future promise that they'd have more valuable land because of it," said Garland City Councilman Doug Athas, who represents the area.

The connectivity to the west arrived quickly. Segments I, II and III of the Bush Turnpike opened between 1998 and 2001, linking Garland to Interstate 35E.

But the city has waited for its I-30 hookup for decades, watching as the Bush Turnpike has been extended and all but connected to the interstate on the other side of the county in Grand Prairie.

Purcell predicted a "big impact" on sales at Firewheel Town Center. "Maybe a 15-20 percent increase in traffic," he said.

Davis, the Rowlett resident, said she'll be more apt to travel south to lakeside developments in Garland and Rockwall, as well as north to Firewheel.

"I will be 10 minutes away from two good dining and shopping areas," she said. "I can't wait to use it."

### Quicker drive

Former Rockwall County Commissioner Bruce Beaty recalled his county's consortium that met to plan the area's rapid growth, planning bond programs and street alignments with the future State Highway 190 in mind.

Three years removed from the commission, Beaty now sees a quicker drive to Plano to see his grandsons and family.

Gottel got the news of the official opening late Monday and was too excited to wait for Tuesday morning's formal announcement from NTTA.

"Well, it's official!!!" the mayor quickly posted on Facebook. "Ladies and Gentlemen ... get your Tolltags ready!"

"It's an honor to be serving at this time," Gottel said Tuesday. "Certain moments mark the history of a city. This moment will certainly be a shining star."