

## LOCAL NEWS

# County updated on I-35E progress

Commissioners learn about committee's new principles for project

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By Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe / Staff Writer

Denton County commissioners continued to wrestle Tuesday morning over what to tell the state about widening Interstate 35E between Denton and Dallas.

During the commissioners' regular meeting, they received an update on the progress of a steering committee, known as the 1420 Committee, that met Monday in Carrollton. The committee's original, legislative charge from Senate Bill 1420 was narrow: to provide guiding principles for the public-private partnership that will pay for the I-35E project, since the Texas Department of Transportation doesn't have the money.

During Monday's meeting of the 1420 Committee, the committee chairman, Michael Morris, introduced a new element to the principles, according to John Polster, the county's transportation consultant.

Morris, who is transportation director with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, added a statement recognizing Dallas Area Rapid Transit, TxDOT and the Regional Transportation Council — part of the council of governments — for paying for HOV lanes in the late 1990s.

It was not immediately clear why the statement was included, Polster told commissioners.

Neither Commissioner Ron Marchant, whose precinct includes the HOV lanes on I-35E that run from FM3040 to Interstate 635, nor Commissioner Andy Eads, who has taken the lead on the project for the commissioners, ventured much of an explanation.

Marchant wondered whether an agency was looking for a financial credit; Eads said after the meeting that new toll lanes would have an HOV component.

In an interview Wednesday afternoon, Morris said the addition was "innocent" and only acknowledged that DART had contributed to I-35E as other entities had done.

"I'm not aware of anyone asking for credit for HOV lanes," Morris said, adding that neither federal officials nor DART had requested any kind of payment.

### IN OTHER ACTION

On Tuesday, Denton County commissioners also:

- Authorized an additional \$760,304 in engineering services for the widening of FM2181, expected to begin in April;
- Authorized the first of two interlocal agreements pledging up to \$50,000 for bicycle lanes between train and bus stops in Denton;
- Authorized an engineering contract for \$392,984 for the widening of Country Club Road near Argyle;
- Authorized an interlocal agreement to build deceleration lanes near Krum schools on FM1173; and
- Honored eight retiring employees, including Paula Flowerday, of the probate court; Randie Geistman, of the elections administration; Dan Hurd, of the sheriff's office; Gary Mabile, of corrections; Charleen Neal, of the health department; Betty Quinn, of motor vehicle registration; Kaye Scott, of the district attorney's office; and Roger Shaw, a court bailiff.

The statement was one of a dozen facts being offered by the 1420 Committee to the Regional Transportation Council that may prove persuasive to other decision-makers who will read the resolution in the future, Morris said.

Nor would the statement of that fact, or any other fact, obligate anyone, Morris said, adding, "although I can't predict the future."

So far, the 1420 Committee has drafted eight items to put before the Regional Transportation Council as the guiding principles for expanding I-35E. Once the committee adopts those principles, the committee's work is done. The council's recommendations direct TxDOT on the project.

Commissioner Hugh Coleman told Polster and other commissioners during Tuesday's meeting that the fourth principle — building free lanes at the same time as toll lanes — wasn't written clearly.

Controversy arose after TxDOT announced that the toll lanes would be built first, and additional free lanes would be added as money became available. The current highway consists of four to six regular lanes and four lanes of frontage road. For years, the planned expansion of I-35E was eight regular lanes and four toll lanes.

Coleman said he knew there were concerns that mandating free lanes might limit the county's negotiating position, but he didn't think it would. Commissioner Bobbie Mitchell agreed.

"This is really the only constriction we really need," Coleman said.

Polster cautioned the commissioners to not use language that would lock the county into a formula, such as building one free lane for each toll lane.

County Judge Mary Horn said there was still time to refine the statements, since the Regional Transportation Council doesn't meet until Jan. 12.

The commissioners agreed to e-mail draft suggestions to Eads and discuss the matter again in two weeks.

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