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Dallas area's transportation growth in 2011 came with many pains



Michael Ainsworth/Staff Photographer

Shutdowns on LBJ Freeway that began in September 2011 were just a preview of the inevitable snarls to come during the massive, five-year project.

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Dallas anchors the fastest-growing major metropolitan area in America, so it's no surprise that transportation politics and policy figured large in North Texas' top news stories of 2011.

It was the first full year of operations for DART's 28-mile Green Line, a major expansion of its rail system, and the continued construction of the Orange Line, scheduled to open by 2013. The North Texas Tollway Authority will complete the eastern extension of the Bush Turnpike this month, even as it borrowed big to get its first toll road in Tarrant County under way this year, too.

The Texas Department of Transportation and the city of Dallas scored big this year, too, as they teamed with regional planners to craft an \$800 million deal to build two new bridges over the Trinity River to complement the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, whose graceful white suspension cables have been teasing Dallas drivers for months as it nears completion in early 2012.

New riders joined the DART system with the opening of the Green Line, but ridership elsewhere fell, as did the use of its buses. Crime jumped up on DART rail lines and buses, as well.

But amid all those developments, there have been five moments where all the tension and pressure of maintaining such fast-growing infrastructure have come together to reveal cracks in the foundation.

Ice storm and DART

On the morning of Feb. 3, a wicked combination of fast-falling temperatures and a thick blanket of ice made most of North Texas' highways impassable. It became a worst-case scenario for planners who had spent months preparing for the hoopla around that Sunday's Super Bowl.

The storm's impact on DART made huge headlines and left hard feelings.

DART trains were knocked out entirely that first day, giving the system its first-ever complete shutdown. By Wednesday, half of the trains couldn't be deployed, and fresh storms in the following days kept the agency underperforming and continued to leave passengers stranded for hours on platforms without any meaningful contact from officials.

DART's lack of preparation and inability to communicate with passengers horrified board Chairman Bill Velasco. When another board member asked why the agency hadn't dispatched police officers to tell passengers freezing on the platforms that trains were not coming, DART President Gary Thomas memorably replied that it had been too cold. Velasco scolded DART management and was quickly rebuked by fellow board members.

DART had trouble again in June when hundreds of thousands of Dallas Mavericks fans headed downtown to celebrate their world championship. One train got stuck in a tunnel between Cityplace and Mockingbird Station, and passengers were left in the dark, literally, without any word about when the train might get moving again. Dozens got scared and hiked through the tunnel to the next station. DART scolded them as lawbreakers — a stance that put the agency under withering criticism.

Thomas apologized, but some passengers said they would never ride again.

Since then, DART has tried to become better prepared for the next storm or other breakdown. While officials rebuffed suggestions that it could better equip its trains and tracks to withstand the cold, DART began installing devices at stations to better communicate with passengers during an emergency.

NTTA scrutiny

On Feb. 22, the deeply insular NTTA board of directors was served notice that other powers in Texas no longer trusted them to run NTTA without oversight. Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, filed a bill to subject NTTA to the sunset process. The Texas Sunset Advisory Commission reviews all state agencies at regular intervals to determine whether they are run in the best interest of the state, whether they should continue, and what changes they need.

NTTA and its cadre of lobbyists fought off that effort, but only by promising to allow the county judges in Collin, Dallas, Tarrant and Denton counties to conduct a review, which was concluded in October. It included deep criticism of NTTA's management, governance, and ethics policies — even as it endorsed its road-building and other core operations as excellent.

The scrutiny continues, however, as NTTA revealed just days after that report that the Federal Bureau of Investigation has interviewed its officials about possible conflicts of interest among current and former board members.

Trinity toll hurdles

On June 5, *The Dallas Morning News* reported on thousands of documents released by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after a two-year struggle to obtain them under the federal Freedom of Information Act. Those records revealed that during the 2007 Trinity River toll road referendum, the city had kept mum about serious reservations about the viability of the “squirrelly project” raised by the corps and other federal officials.

Federal officials repeatedly told the city that the project was possible, but its many caveats were downplayed. Needless to say, the hurdles the city would face on a project that had never been tried before weren't part of the public relations campaign tightly coordinated between city officials, Trinity River project backers and the NTTA.

Most of those hurdles involved the corps' worry that placing the toll road between the levees would weaken their ability to withstand historic floods. In the years since, the toll road has been put on deep hiatus as mounting problems with the levees have surfaced. Another complication arose when NTTA said it will have no money to bridge the billion-dollar gap between the amount it could borrow against future tolls on the road and what it would cost to build it.

LBJ construction

On Sept. 1, the newspaper carried an unusual warning on its front page: Stay off LBJ Freeway, no matter what you do. The dire message came as the teams rebuilding LBJ between I-35E and Central Expressway warned that traffic disruptions were unavoidable in the weeks to come as they demolished several bridges. The weekends of work came and went, and tie-ups snarled traffic anyway. But it was just a taste of what's to come as work continues on the massive, five-year project to rebuild LBJ's eight main lanes, add continuous frontage roads and dig a path for six new tolled lanes that will run underneath the existing highway.

And for commuters coming from northeast Tarrant County, it is just more of the same. Traffic has been snarled — and traffic accidents up — in Grapevine at the airport for more than a year as crews rush through the massive DFW Connector project.

With another major project in Tarrant County, the North Tarrant Express, and new toll roads by NTTA throughout the region, the Dallas area is home to nearly \$10 billion worth of highway improvement. New bridges and new rail lines are under way, too.

Unfortunately, by coming all at once, traffic is snarled everywhere you turn.

The good news? It will all be over by 2015 or so.

Shake-up in NTTA

On Oct. 14, just days after the county judges issued their report, Allen Clemson was forced to resign as NTTA's executive director. He was the third executive to be ousted. John Dahill, the general counsel, was forced to resign earlier this year. And a month later, Victor Vandergriff announced he no longer had the support to remain board chairman.

All three had a desire to ease the NTTA's reliance on so-called legacy firms that had served as outside lawyers, engineers and financial advisors for decades. Records produced by NTTA show that dissatisfaction with Clemson had been mounting for months, and a majority of board members had deeply resented the way Vandergriff had run the agency's negotiations over an external audit overseen by four area county judges.

New chairman Kenneth Barr has vowed to move quickly on reforms recommended by the external auditors, and new ethics rules are in the works. Meanwhile, NTTA's new interim boss is Gerry Kerrigan, a former executive with the HNTB engineering firm who was critical of staff's recommendation to fire HNTB last year.