

Dallas wins grant for streetcar line; NTTA gets help with Highway 161

12:00 AM CST on Thursday, February 18, 2010

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/ The Dallas Morning News
Rudolph Bush contributed to this report.

Dallas pedestrians, including tourists and daytime workers alike, will have a new way to get from downtown to [Oak Cliff](#), thanks to surprise federal funding announced Wednesday for a starter streetcar line.

The \$23 million federal grant, which had seemed a long shot to regional leaders as recently as this week, is only about half what the city had asked for. City Hall officials said Wednesday they weren't yet sure how or if the proposal will be scaled back to reflect the smaller grant.

Streetcars take three years to purchase, given the long lead times involved, so don't expect to be reminded of [San Francisco](#) anytime soon. Beyond that, the city still has to evaluate its proposed route – deciding which bridge the cars will cross, for instance – and that could extend the completion date even further, [Dallas City Council](#) member Linda Koop said.

Still, she said she was "delightfully surprised" by the announcement Wednesday morning of the stimulus funds, which came on the first anniversary of the signing of the stimulus package. The streetcar grant and a separate \$20 million grant to the [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) were part of a \$1.5 billion special grant competition that attracted more than \$59 billion in funding requests.

The two Dallas grants were among 51 doled out Wednesday, and the only ones to go to Texas.

The initial streetcar application had asked for \$96 million, an amount that would have been shared with [Fort Worth](#) equally. Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez said Wednesday, during a stop in Grapevine, that Fort Worth was dropped entirely and Dallas' reward was scaled back as Washington tried to find ways to reduce the scope of some grants in order to spread the funding around to more recipients.

"The grant program was simply way oversubscribed," Mendez said.

Reduced funding or not, Koop and others hailed the news.

Koop, who chairs the council's transportation committee, said the grant will pay for a starter loop that is expected to reach over into Oak Cliff. But she said work will continue on a larger streetcar initiative that could cost \$80 million and will complement a second

downtown light-rail line when it opens in 2016. The starter loop to Oak Cliff should help boost those efforts, too, she said.

The focus on streetcars and other nontraditional forms of transportation has grown much more intense since President Barack Obama's election.

An early indication of Washington's support for the trolley lines came last month, when it announced it would no longer follow a Bush administration policy that subjected every major transit application to a cost-effectiveness measure that focused on how many vehicles it took off busy highways.

"It's a different paradigm in transportation now, and you've got to have sustainable communities. It starts with big cities," Koop said.

Even the reduced grant will go a long way toward helping plan construction of a streetcar loop, she said. As outlined in the federal announcement, the downtown Dallas streetcar line would originate at Harwood and Main streets.

It would run along Main to Houston Street, where it would connect with the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority and Trinity Railway Express lines at Union Station.

The line would also stop at the Dallas Convention Center (and the adjacent city-owned hotel now under construction); at the Trinity River park planned as one of the largest urban parks in the country; at Methodist Dallas Medical Center in Oak Cliff; the Oak Cliff Gateway area; and in several residential areas.

"We're excited," said Jason Roberts, founder and board member of the Oak Cliff Transit Authority, which helped write the grant proposal.

"It's a win-win. [Downtown] Dallas is getting a portion, and we're getting a portion."

He said city staff will have to be creative to build the starter loop with less money than they initially sought.

"What do we do with half the money? We're going to have to figure out where those dollars are going to be directed," Roberts said.

Bob Stimson, president of the Oak Cliff Chamber of Commerce and a former Dallas City Council member, called the \$23 million a good start.

"I'm pretty darn happy," he said.

Perhaps cost savings and other money sources can fill in the funding gap, Stimson said. In any case, he said, Wednesday's announcement "cements the idea that we are building a streetcar line from Methodist Hospital to downtown, and that can't be anything but good for Oak Cliff."

The streetcar grants generated the most buzz at City Hall Wednesday, but the separate, \$20 million State Highway 161 grant could have an even larger impact on area commuters. The grant will cover costs associated with a \$400 million government loan that will now be available to the North Texas Tollway Authority, a piece of good news that will greatly reduce the borrowing costs on that highway.

NTTA board chairman Paul Wageman said the announcement caught the agency off guard, but in a good way, and that its financial experts were assessing its impact. But he said because the loan requires no payments for five years and has other extremely generous terms, it should allow NTTA to more easily build a second project, the Southwest Parkway in [Tarrant County](#).

"This is really great news," he said, noting that it would not have been possible had it not been for U.S. Rep. [Eddie Bernice Johnson](#), D-Dallas, and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, each of whom had personally and repeatedly lobbied Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and other top officials in favor of the Dallas grants.

"We need to use every mode of transportation available," Johnson said. Highways alone, she said, won't cut the city's traffic congestion or improve its air quality.

Staff writer Rudolph Bush contributed to this report.