

Dallas County may create toll agency

11:51 PM CST on Tuesday, March 2, 2010

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[Dallas](#) County commissioners are considering eying a plan that would give them the same legal powers as the [North Texas Tollway Authority](#), including the right to issue bonds guaranteed by future toll traffic and to enter into long-term contracts with private toll firms.

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Commissioner Maurine Dickey made the proposal to create a Dallas County toll authority Tuesday, just four days after NTTA leaders said the agency it will slow its own pursuit of toll roads over the next five years. It wants to focus concentrate on paying down debt and finishing several roads now under development.

“This is not aimed at competing with the NTTA,” Dickey said. “The NTTA chairman has said that agency is maxed out. This is about adopting a new paradigm when it comes to transportation funding.”

NTTA spokeswoman Sherita Coffelt said NTTA the authority should remain the primary builder of the region’s toll roads, but declined to comment about Dickey’s proposal specifically.

Commissioner Mike Cantrell, however, pressed Dickey on how the proposed new authority would provide what NTTA says it can’t: money in the short -term to pay for new toll roads.

“Will we take property taxes from county residents to build toll roads?” he asked.

Dickey dismissed that suggestion as a “scare tactic.” But she declined to say how the proposed new authority would raise money for new roads, saying such details could be studied later.

The county could issue bonds, backed by tolls or other revenues, she said, or partner with a private firm, such as the Spanish company Cintra, which the state initially had been chosen by the state to finance and build NTTA’s Sam Rayburn Tollway.

“We may never use this tool, but what’s wrong with putting it in the tool box?” Dickey said asked, noting that the Legislature may take it away in 2011.

Commissioner Ken Mayfield and Dallas County Judge Jim Foster said they support the proposal. Commissioners Cantrell and [John Wiley Price](#) do not. Dickey said a vote is likely within the next few weeks.

Foster said support for creating the toll authority does not mean he’d support using it.

“This is not a vote to ask if we want to get into the toll business,” he said. “But we have a narrow window of time to take advantage of this law, so I say go ahead and let’s pass it.”

Cantrell said the vote will be a “slap in the face” to of Dallas County’s neighbors, and would work against the area’s commitment to handle major transportation problems regionally.

Collin County formed a local toll authority in late 2008, prompting an outpouring of condemnation by some lawmakers — and by Dickey herself, who says she initially saw it as a selfish move.

Collin Commissioner Joe Jaynes said the local toll authority does not have the resources to build a major toll road, but he said that by having its own authority, Collin County could win a bigger say in how revenues from future roads will be split among area counties.

Dallas Commissioner Ken Mayfield said NTTA is tapped out because it paid the region \$3.2 billion upfront for the Sam Rayburn Tollway in 2007.

“That [payment] was leveraged on the backs of the people who drive those toll roads,” he shouted during Tuesday’s the meeting.

But it wasn’t clear how supporting the creation of a new authority would lessen the region’s reliance on toll roads.

Dickey said she wants to continue working with neighboring counties, but said her first focus has to be on Dallas County.

“My goal is to be regional,” she said, “but I don’t want us to be regional at the expense of the county. ... I wasn’t elected by the region.”