

N. Texas highway improvements come with a toll: Expect construction snarls for 5 years, stiff tolls after that

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By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER / The Dallas Morning News

Dallas-area traffic has been among the worst in the nation for years, and for many commuters it's about to get a lot worse before it gets better.

Call it growing pains, or just one big mess, but construction has either already started or soon will on no fewer than a half-dozen of the most heavily traveled – and already backed up – traffic corridors in North Texas, as the region embarks on what may be the most aggressive road-building program in the country.

Commutes will be lengthened and lanes closed as orange vests and red taillights become as common on our highways as bluebonnets in Burnet.

And when it's over in five years or so, many of those same drivers will be stuck in traffic as crowded as ever – unless they want to pay hefty tolls to keep moving.

Nearly all of the biggest highway improvements will add more toll lanes. They involve just about every important corridor in the region, from the complete reconstruction of part of LBJ Freeway in Dallas to the unsnarling of the Grapevine Funnel, now known as the DFW Connector, to the extension of State Highway 161 in Dallas County and the eastward march of the Bush Turnpike.

Some projects, like the LBJ Freeway and the North Tarrant Express in the mid-cities, will combine rebuilt free lanes and improved access roads with brand-new and especially expensive toll lanes. Others, such as Bush Turnpike extension and Highway 161, will be pure toll roads.

Only the DFW Connector, the fruit of 30 years or more of patient advocacy in the Grapevine area, will see the lion's share of the improvement come in the form of free roads. But it, too, will include some tolls.

So, North Texas, this is the toll-road future you've been hearing about. And officials from [Arlington](#) to Austin to Washington say it's the best government can do to keep up with traffic in the fastest-growing metro area in the country.

Lack of resources

"We're dealing with the reality that we do not have the resources we need to keep up with our demands," said Bill Meadows of [Fort Worth](#), one of five members of the Texas

Transportation Commission. "I know there are people who want to say, 'Those dirty sons of guns, why didn't they build it all free?' Well, we could have done that, but you would have got squat."

Officials at the Texas Department of Transportation have warned for the past year that money for major new projects runs out by 2012. That's thanks partly to heavy borrowing in recent years that has left the state with big annual interest payments, eating away at already inadequate gas tax revenues.

Critics of Gov. Rick Perry's toll-road-first emphasis, and of his no-new taxes mantra, would add that he's failed to push the Legislature to consider higher taxes that would have reduced the state's reliance on tolls.

But on top of those issues is something simpler still: As time passes, and more roads are added, Texas' massive inventory of highways and bridges – some 193,308 miles in all, the most in the U.S. – gets older and larger every day, meaning maintenance costs are a growing burden. Last year, Texas spent \$2.98 billion on maintenance, and will spend about that much this year.

Meanwhile, Dallas-Fort Worth added almost 100,000 residents last year, and 1.3 million in the past decade. As regional planners like to say, nearly all of them brought a car, but none packed any new roads and bridges in the moving van.

"Let's face some realities and look at the growth of this state over the past 25 years," said Meadows, an insurance executive who was vice chairman of the [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) before Perry named him to the commission. "There are vast areas of Texas losing population, but the opposite is happening here. Given this growth, our roadways are going to be a lot more congested."

Traffic jams have been a way of life in Dallas, and in most big cities, for decades. And the recent stimulus-funded surge of smaller construction jobs has made this spring especially busy. And with more than 1,000 workers building Dallas Area Rapid Transit's Green Line to Carrollton and the Orange Line to Irving, traffic problems and lane closures have become routine.

But to keep all that congestion from turning the highways into permanent parking lots, North Texas has added to the regular mix of highway projects a set of marquee projects across the region, all built at the same time and nearly all of them using a new approach to keep traffic moving once they are done.

For now, it will mean a lot of taillights for drivers.

Widening the Funnel

One project already under way is the DFW Connector in Grapevine, a massive rebuilding of part of State Highway 114/121 and State Highway 26 near the airport and downtown Grapevine.

It will widen some areas to 24 lanes, including new frontage roads and four new express tolled lanes. Lane closings and other traffic bothers have already begun and will continue until the work is complete in 2014.

"I think people here are optimistic, they are just tired of all this traffic," said Jerry Hodge, a former public works director for Grapevine who now works as liaison between the city and the private firms building the connector.

"There is a little bit of question about how bad is it going to get in the meantime. But the other side is that they are relieved to see this happen."

He noted, as did officials throughout the region, that modern highway contracts nearly always carry stiff requirements that encourage builders to keep as many lanes open during the day as possible, and sometimes impose big fines for shutdowns during rush-hour.

Mitigation efforts aside, Maggie Smits of Colleyville has already noticed the traffic snarls near her office on Grapevine's Main Street, and especially when she takes her husband to and from the airport.

"I picked him up Thursday night, for example, and coming out of the north side of the airport onto 114, they had blocked that exit. So we took the bridge over to the back way and took 26 all the way home. It took forever."

When the cones near the DFW Connector are finally put away, drivers like Smits will see real improvement. Most new lanes will be free, and the troubling interchanges that have bottlenecked the region for years will be smoother.

But for drivers in other areas of North Texas, the payoff won't be as neat.

The dilemma is best illustrated on the LBJ Freeway in Dallas, routinely listed as one of the country's most traffic-clogged corridors.

Drivers now have three free lanes in each direction, with a narrow HOV lane occupying what used to be the shoulder. Beginning next year, those lanes routinely will be reduced to two – and occasionally fewer than that – as the private toll operator Cintra and its partners completely rebuild the road.

When it opens, probably in 2016, the new LBJ will be an engineering marvel. In place of the current lanes will be four free main lanes. And tucked underneath the cantilevered top lanes will be three brand-new lanes half-dug into the earth like an open channel.

Those three new lanes won't be cheap, as they will help usher in something new for North Texas: dynamic pricing for toll roads that means the more drivers need them, the more they will cost.

Opening toll rates during rush likely will be about 50 cents per mile, more than three times the rates NCTA charges on its roads. Depending on demand, the rates could reach 75 cents or more.

Managed-lane concept

[Michael Morris](#), transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said the new LBJ will be a good deal for drivers in North Texas.

Those who won't pay tolls, he said, still will have four rebuilt lanes to choose from. And frontage roads will be improved and made continuous.

Besides, experts have long warned that so many drivers would like to use LBJ Freeway that trying to build enough free lanes there to keep traffic moving would require at least 16 lanes in each direction. Morris noted that's neither feasible nor wise. The managed-lane approach will give people a choice between traffic for free or a fast ride for a price.

Cintra, which also is developing the North Tarrant Express, will be contractually obligated to keep toll traffic moving at 50 mph or more at all times, a commitment it will keep by jacking up toll rates when traffic gets heavy.

Meadows said he knows some residents will feel let down when they see that the only sure escape from traffic will come with a hefty toll.

"Here's the thing," he said. "It really depends on what your expectations are, what the citizenry expects. If my expectation is that my drive in to my office in Fort Worth, on what we call the free roads, is going to be like it used to be – that we are going to return to 1968, when the government built all the roads for free – I'm going to be really disappointed."