

NTTA rejects Collin County's plan for Dallas North Tollway's northernmost route, delays vote on legacy firm

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The [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) rejected a bid by Collin County and Celina city leaders Wednesday to set the northernmost extension of the Dallas North Tollway entirely within Collin County, a plan that would have infuriated neighboring Denton County.

Instead, the authority voted 7-1 to extend the toll road along the Denton-Collin county line, keeping to an alignment that both counties had endorsed in 2005, before Collin leaders changed their mind two years ago.

The board also voted 6-3 to postpone a decision on whether to accept a staff recommendation to replace HNTB Corp. as its lead engineering firm.

HNTB has been the general engineering consultant for NTTA since 1953. But NTTA staff announced this month that another national firm, partnering with a local Dallas engineering firm, had outscored it in a competitive bidding process for a new five-year contract.

Staff recommended that HNTB, which operates in an office building across from NTTA headquarters and manages some of its key projects, be replaced.

An item on Wednesday's agenda would have canceled that procurement, keeping HNTB in place, at least for now.

An unusually divided nine-member board stopped short of doing that, instead postponing a decision for at least one month, and probably two or three.

Celina plan rejected

The northern alignment of the Dallas North Tollway approved Wednesday straddles the Collin-Denton county line and extends 11.9 miles from FM423 in Collin County to FM121 in Grayson County.

In choosing that route, NTTA turned its back, at least for now, on what Celina officials said should be a new model for building toll roads: the tiny city's offer to give NTTA more than \$200 million in future property taxes derived from development along the toll road.

"I hope that when people look at me, they say, 'He may not be any smarter than he looks, but that ol' boy is fair.' And I think this is fair," said NTTA board member David Dennison, a Denton County appointee who supported the county-line route rather than options that would have kept the road in a single county.

Only Collin County appointee Bill Moore voted in favor of setting the tollway route to the east.

He said the authority was missing a chance to win new revenue by partnering with a city willing to pledge its property taxes to the authority.

When speaking of fairness, Moore said, "I think we have to keep our toll payers in mind as well.

The toll road creates extraordinary economic value wherever it goes.

That growth is immediate and significant, but none of that value accrues to the toll payer. I think this proposal put together by Celina is an excellent one, and one that allows the people who benefit the most to contribute" to the toll roads.

Chairman Paul Wageman, also of Collin County, did not vote, explaining that his law firm represents property owners near other segments of the tollway.

Division on deals

On the consulting contract issue, some board members favored a break with the past and the agency's dependence on legacy firms.

Alan Sims of Dallas County spoke for some who wanted to honor the bidding process and award the contract to PBS&J and a partner firm owned by black engineer Edwin Jones. That, other board members said, would be a welcome step toward improving NTTA's track record in working with minority-owned firms.

But several board members said they simply did not have enough confidence in the process designed by staff members to put out for bid the key contracts filled by HNTB and four other legacy firms.

Wageman and vice chairman Victor Vandergriff of [Tarrant County](#) said the staff and board need more time to think through the implications of replacing HNTB and the other firms that have done work with NTTA for decades, and whose contracts also expire this year.

"The full board never considered or vetted this procurement process in its entirety. Our committee structure failed us, and it was a serious error," said Vandergriff, son of former Tarrant County Judge Tom Vandergriff. "I am not adverse to change. Change is good. It is noteworthy and necessary. I noted when I joined this board that it seemed incredulous

to me that when I look around, I see the same firms that my father took the lead in hiring in 1953 were still here in their same roles. It is still incredulous to me."

But there are too many questions about the wisdom of the course laid out by staff to move forward now, he said.

"My sincere apologies to all of you for our errors in the timing of this process and in our judgment," he said.

Jones, the engineer whose EJES Inc. firm will share in 27 percent of the contract should it eventually wrest it from HNTB, left the meeting unsure what is in store for him or his partner in the bid, PBS&J.

"I don't know what they did," he said, noting that the contract is expected to be worth up to \$30 million to the two firms over the next five years.

"The process was fair. It's a process that as engineers we have to live with day in and day out. So I don't know what the problem is now, or where we stand."