

Editorial: Tollway agency works to restore confidence

03:13 PM CDT on Friday, July 23, 2010

The [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) made the right decision by ignoring high-dollar bait dangled its way to choose a Collin County route for a future stretch of the Dallas North

Property owners near the new roadway will make a bundle after it's built, and the city of Celina wanted the super-heated development inside its boundaries. No problem with that. Celina made the novel pledge that NTTA could have the future bounty of the higher property taxes. No problem with creative thinking, except for where it might lead.

Had the NTTA jumped at the money, it might have opened the door to an era of transportation planning by municipal bidding war. Those kinds of cash inducements may be in our future someday as road money dries up, but the rules aren't in place nor the consequences fully thought out yet.

The bigger problem with the proposed Celina route was that it would have further insulted a one-time compact made between Collin and Denton counties to run the future road segment up their common border. The deal was reached in 2005, but Collin County reneged three years later in a snit about dividing toll revenue. Collin County formed its own, rival tollway authority and vowed not to let money get away.

The decisive 7-1 vote by NTTA to honor the county-line route is a statement about regionalism. Just as the region's major highways serve a wide swath of commuters and travelers, the benefits should be measured out fairly as well.

A second, wider-ranging issue last week left the NTTA board in uncharacteristic disarray. The board had been poised to decide whether to replace the giant HNTB Corp. as its lead engineering firm, but members couldn't get good answers about criteria the staff used in recommending replacement firms. A split board put the contract matter on hold, and rightly so, considering the confusion, but a push toward efficiencies inside the agencies mustn't wane.

Dallas Morning News transportation writer Michael Lindenberger has documented how a handful of so-called "legacy" firms long used by the NTTA cost millions more in professional services – and even clerk work – than if it were done in house.

Top NTTA officials have conceded that they need to be smarter in spending the public's money and would re-evaluate the agency's reliance on outside professional services.

Making good on that pledge is critical. With the network of toll roads spreading across the region, tolls paid by drivers have become a proxy for transportation taxes. And

though it is a state agency, the NTTA isn't subject to the same level of scrutiny in Austin as other agencies and departments.

That leaves the onus on the NTTA board to shape up practices from the inside. The HNTB contact was the first major stab at it. Next time there should be a more confidence-inspiring outcome.