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DFW Connector first of many transit projects set for 2010

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Groundbreaking ceremonies for the \$1.02 billion DFW Connector project were last week, heralding the first of many area transportation projects set to begin construction throughout 2010.

At the Northeast Tarrant Transportation Summit on Feb. 17 in Grapevine, officials from state and regional transportation organizations, elected officials and business representatives said the projects – including the DFW Connector and North Tarrant Express – are key to improving mobility in the region, but officials also expressed concern for the future of transportation in Texas as state funds continue to dwindle.

“We’ve got more road projects that are going to start in the next 12 months than any other area in the U.S.,” Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes said at the summit.

The groundbreaking ceremony for construction on the first phase of the DFW Connector project, which ultimately will expand state highways 114 and 121 north of Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and includes tolled lanes, also was Feb. 17.

The Connector’s 8.4 mile initial phase is expected to take about four years to complete. The project is being built under a comprehensive development agreement between the Texas Department of Transportation and NorthGate Constructors, and is being funded with \$250 million in federal stimulus funds, \$667 million in public gas tax dollars and \$107 million in bond proceeds for right of way acquisitions. The remaining portions of the total 14.4 mile project are unfunded.

The first phase of the \$2 billion Northeast Tarrant Express project, which will expand free lanes and add toll lanes from just east of the Loop 820 and I-35W interchange 13 miles west to the 121 split, is set for construction in late 2010 and expected to be completed by 2015. In total, the project will expand about 40 miles of roadway including I-35 W from the Alliance area in north Fort Worth south to I-30 and state highways 121 and 183 east to the Dallas County line.

The North Tarrant Express is being

constructed through a public-private

partnership between the Department of Transportation and NTE Mobility Partners.

Fort Worth businessman Bill Meadows, who was appointed commissioner to the Texas Transportation Commission by Gov. Rick Perry in 2008, also spoke at the summit on criticisms of the Department of Transportation and his concerns for the future of transportation funding in Texas.

Meadows said while some of the criticism against the Department of Transportation from various officials running for office or re-election this year is appropriate, the agency has taken steps to become more efficient and transparent.

Meadows also expressed concern about transportation funding issues in Texas, adding that the Department of Transportation is expected to be out of money for new projects in a few years, and that future projects won't be able to follow the pattern of funding through debt agreements and federal stimulus funds currently being used.

"This is not sustainable," he said. "At some point in the very near future TxDOT will have no new money to spend on new projects."

New funding ideas the legislature should consider are increasing or indexing the motor fuels tax, revamping the state's vehicle registration system to possibly charge a higher registration fee for vehicles releasing higher emissions, and creating transportation finance zones which would be similar to tax increment financing districts, Meadows said.

"There is not a single answer to the challenge, but we need to consider every one of these," Meadows said.

He also encouraged those attending the Feb. 17 event to express support for public transportation to their representatives and senators in the state legislature.

Russell Laughlin, the senior vice president of Hillwood Properties, spoke at the event about the importance of reliable transportation to economic development, emphasizing that the sooner transit projects are funded and completed, the sooner jobs will come to North Texas.

Other projects expected to begin in 2010 include expansions to various roadways in northern Tarrant County including Randol Mill Road and Golden Triangle Boulevard

