

# Texas Transportation Department to advance huge Houston-area toll project

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Published 24 February 2011 11:17 PM

Dallas is used to calling itself the toll road capital of Texas. But the state's highway chiefs voted Thursday to advance the next stage of a grand toll road project encircling Houston that could dwarf even the most ambitious plans seen in North Texas.

The project, known as the Grand Parkway, could stretch 180 miles through seven counties and become the first private toll road built in Texas' largest city, where until now toll roads have been built by the county toll authority.

But it's not the sheer size of the project that has left some Dallas-area transportation officials grimacing. Instead, they ask how the Texas Department of Transportation can afford to spend \$340 million in exceedingly scarce highway money to pay for a 14.1-mile segment to connect Interstate 10 and U.S. Highway 290 in a mostly undeveloped area of Harris County.

The funds were identified just last month, after the Texas Transportation Commission asked agency executives to search the couch cushions for ways to pay for the highway even as the agency continues to warn lawmakers that it will run out of money for new projects entirely by 2012.

What they found, said department assistant executive director John Barton, was about \$350 million lying unspent because the agency had overestimated what it must keep to satisfy bond agreements related to the Texas Mobility Fund, a \$6.4 billion road-building program.

"That money was not committed to anything," Barton said. "It had been accumulating there, and the plan had been all along to pool it until it becomes large enough that we can then go back and do another program call in the future."

It turns out to be just enough to pay the \$340 million price tag for the segment of the Grand Parkway's 48-mile route through Harris County.

But that \$340 million is also more than enough to fully fund other high-profile projects across Texas, including some in Dallas that remain in limbo because state funding is so scarce.

The money would probably be enough to pay for the reconstruction of S.M. Wright Boulevard and the approaches to a new signature Interstate 30 bridge over the Trinity River.

Michael Morris, transportation director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said he's not ready to criticize the commissioners' decision, since a second vote will be taken as early as next month to formally spend the funds.

But he said that when the region embraced a greater reliance on toll roads over the past five years, it did so expecting that it would not be shorted its fair share of tax dollars for roads.

"The question is, if you are going to use those funds somewhere else, are you going to somehow make up our allocation?" he said.

Transportation Department Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said he spent the past three weeks asking the staff why Houston deserves the newfound money more than Dallas or another congested big city. In the end, he said, he's confident North Texas will get its share over time.

"I had to ask a lot of questions before I got comfortable," Meadows said. "I am on [State Highway] 183 right now, leaving the airport, and it happens to be 5:28 in the afternoon. The traffic is awful. I live here, and I get it."

He said the Houston project's draw was its potential to bring in billions in private equity to build the larger Grand Parkway — something neither the I-30 bridge nor the S.M. Wright Boulevard project could offer.

"You are talking about for an investment of X, you get Y," Meadows said. "And in this case, Y is going to be, maybe, a factor of five times or more. That's why you do it."

The Transportation Department will probably need legislative approval to strike a deal with private investors to complete the Grand Parkway. On Thursday, House Transportation Committee Chairman Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, said that approval is likely.

"That will come out of the House, and the Senate, too," Phillips said. "There are some who still oppose [private toll roads]. But they tend not to be from areas of Texas where congestion is a problem."

If funding can be found, officials hope the full road could open by 2018. Two segments of the road were completed in 1994 and 2008, opening about 33 miles in all.

Morris said North Texas has until Tuesday to give the department formal comments on its plans to spend the \$340 million in Harris County.

"We have several recommendations," he said.