

Senate transportation panel boosts Dallas-area private toll projects

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Published 23 March 2011 11:18 PM

The Senate transportation committee took steps Wednesday to speed the development of two major toll projects in North Texas, approving bills that will expand the state's authority to partner with private firms to build toll roads.

The bills both passed unanimously in the committee, though they still must be passed by the full body and win acceptance in the House. If they become law, the Texas Department of Transportation will be permitted to partner with private firms to build a 28-mile stretch of Interstate 35E between Dallas and Denton and a 9.1-mile segment of State Highway 183 from Dallas through Irving.

The projects would add free lanes and new paid managed lanes. The roads would be financed with public and private funds. In return, the companies would be given rights to toll the paid lanes for decades.

Denton County Judge Mary Horn said privately financed toll roads are essential given that Texas roads funds are running short.

"We keep hearing the message loud and clear from constituents — do something now," Horn said. "Leveraging private equity through a public-private partnership is the best and perhaps only way to address growing congestion before it worsens further."

Terri Hall, a San Antonio activist who has spearheaded years of opposition to private toll roads, spoke out. "You remember the dust-up in 2007, and Texans haven't changed their mind," Hall said. "It's public money for private profit, and the public hates it."

The committee also heard a compromise bill that would significantly limit the late fees charged by the North Texas Tollway Authority, a practice that has left some frequent violators owing thousands of dollars for unpaid tolls.

If the bill passes, the NTTA would have to stop charging \$25 for every unpaid toll transaction. Because a single invoice can easily have scores of transactions, the fees can quickly dwarf the original amount owed.

The bill would instead allow the NTTA to assess the \$25 for only the first eight unpaid tolls per invoice. After that the bill's \$200-per-invoice cap would apply.

NTTA Executive Director Allen Clemson told senators he supported the bill, written by Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound.

Nelson initially filed a bill that would have capped late fees at \$25 per invoice, a move that the NTTA said would cost it tens of millions of dollars each year.

Clemson vowed to work with Nelson at the time to craft a compromise.

Officials testify for I-35E project

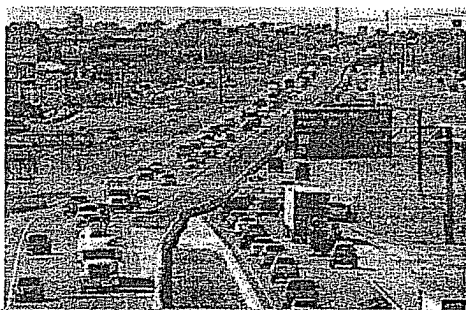
State Senate committee votes for bill after hearing from county judge, others

12:17 AM CDT on Thursday, March 24, 2011

By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

The proposal to expand Interstate 35E is making progress, according to Denton County officials who testified before the state Senate's transportation committee Wednesday.

County Judge Mary Horn, an avid supporter of expansion, said the bill was laid out, testified on and passed on a committee vote, leaving officials waiting for further legislative action from Senate committees and the Texas House.



DRC/Barron Ludwig

Traffic rolls up and down Interstate 35E in southeastern Denton on Wednesday, the same day County Judge Mary Horn and other regional officials lobbied the state Legislature to approve a major expansion project for the highway.

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"Everything went great," Horn said.

During this year's legislative session, Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, co-sponsored an I-35E bill with Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano. Rep. Myra Crownover, R-Denton, and Rep. Burt Solomons, R-Carrollton, filed companion bills in the House.

Under state law, public-private partnerships that use private equity to pay for and build major regional roads require legislative approval.

Senate Bills 1144 and 1145 would authorize public-private partnerships to expand a 28-mile stretch of the I-35E corridor from Dallas to Denton and a 9.1-mile segment of the State Highway 183 corridor from Dallas through Irving.

The estimated cost of the I-35E project is \$4.4 billion.

Horn testified at the morning hearing along with Bob Franke, mayor of Cedar Hill and chairman of the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition, and Linda Koop, vice chairwoman of the coalition and a Dallas City Council member.

County transportation consultant John Polster was present but didn't testify.

In addition, Denton city spokesman John Cabrales presented a letter from the mayor and mayor pro tem in support of the expansion.

The committee approved the bill right after hearing testimony, surprising Horn.

"You don't always have them vote on it at that time," she said. "This was voted out of committee, which is great, and sent to the local and consent calendar committee in the Senate."

Horn said bill supporters need to get the proposal on the Senate floor and get forward progress on the companion bills in the House.

"If we can get it to local and consent in the House, not just in the Senate, it has an immediate effective date upon the governor's signing," Horn said. "If in the House the bill doesn't get sent to LAC, it would have a Sept. 1 effective date. Either way, it is moving along nicely."

Horn said the office of Rep. Tan Parker, R-Flower Mound, on Friday requested a House hearing on the I-35E bill and is optimistic the bill will be heard next week.

Polster said the project would add lanes to the corridor from Interstate 635 to U.S. Highway 380.

The current highway consists of four to six regular lanes and four lanes of frontage roads.

The new project would include eight regular lanes, four tolled HOV lanes and four to six frontage lanes, depending on the need, Polster said.

Leading up to the legislative look at the expansion bill, Horn and Commissioner Andy Eads were making rounds in the county meeting with people, clubs and organizations, pushing the expansion.

County officials' latest stop to drum up local support was the March 16 monthly meeting of the Denton Republican Women's Club.

"The group was very interested in hearing about the proposal for funding alternatives to I-35[E]," Eads said. "Judge Horn and I had a great opportunity to outline what the project is and what the project isn't."

Eads said a lot of people don't understand the project and the concept behind it. The meetings are a great opportunity to talk through it — not just in sound bites — and to talk about the state funding crisis and options to get it done.

"At the end of the day, [people] realize this is the best option we have," Eads said.

Susan Passariello, political action committee chairwoman with the Denton Republican Women's Club, said the presentation by Horn and Eads was well-received by club members and she herself is a firm supporter of the managed-lane option.

"I think the citizens of Denton County should be really proud that our elected officials really understand the transportation needs of this community and North Texas," she said.

Senate committee votes 7-0 to OK private toll road to expand North Tarrant Express



By

Michael Lindenberger/Reporter

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8:08 AM on Wed., Mar. 23, 2011 | [Permalink](#)

A head's up: Transportation committees in the House and Senate are hearing testimony on key bills that would greatly impact the transportation picture in North Texas. the hearings began at 8 a.m., and the Senate hearing can be [viewed here](#) and the [House hearing here](#).

The fight over private toll roads in Texas appears to be over, and the supporters have won -- at least in the Senate transportation committee.

That committee voted 7-0 to approve a bill introduced by Sen. [Wendy Davis](#), D-Fort [Worth](#), that will give TxDOT limited authority to create new privately financed toll roads in North Texas.

The bill, [SB 1017](#), is narrowly drawn to grant authority to the state to partner with a private investor to extend the North Tarrant Express between State Highway 183 from State Highway 121 to State Highway 161. The bill would also extend the toll road on Interstate 35W to Interstate 30 to State Highway 114.

It's one of many project-specific bills that would expand TxDOT's authority to enter into partnerships with private companies to build toll roads. (Another one about to be voted on would grant authority to build the Interstate 35E between Dallas and Denton as a hybrid toll and free toll road.)

Initial segments of the North Tarrant Express -- which will combine free lanes and paid lanes -- are already underway, but the new bill would give authority to greatly expand the toll road.

North Texas business leaders and transportation advocates praised the bill, and Sen. [Tommy Williams](#), the committee chairman, said he had heard of absolutely no opposition to it.

Terri Hall, a San Antonio activist who has spearheaded years of opposition to private toll roads, spoke out against the bill. "You remember the dust-up in 2007 and Texans haven't changed their mind," Hall told the committee. "It's public money for private profit and the public hates it."