

Feds to hail DFW Connector as largest stimulus (highway) project in U.S.



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On Wednesday, the Federal Highway Administrator will be in Dallas to cut the ribbon on the **DFW Connector**, a \$1.02 billion project that TxDOT says will "transform the area around Interstate 635 and state highways 114, 121 and 360."

More stimulus funds -- some \$250 million -- are flowing into the Connector than any single other project in the country. That's why Administrator Victor Mendez will be here, said U.S. Department of Transportation spokeswoman Nancy Singer.

Like the **LBJ Freeway reconstruction** and the **Northeast Tarrant Express**, two other massive highway projects about to get underway in North Texas, the Connector will be a mix of free lanes and toll lanes. Unlike those other two projects, however, there is no private money in this project. Texas is paying some \$667 million in gas taxes, plus another \$107 million in money borrowed through bonding. The \$250 million in federal stimulus dollars make up the rest.

So with all this tax money committed, why toll the lanes at all? TxDOT and the local elected leaders who strongly supported the project say that's because only tolling will allow officials to manage the traffic flow on the lanes. The new lanes would quickly become congested unless some are so expensive that only people who really, really want to use them will pay to do so.

As traffic gets heavier on the free roads, the tolls on the optional tolled lanes will go up. So traffic will, theoretically, always be moving on the Connector -- but it won't be cheap.

Here's the official explanation, from TxDOT's DFW Connector site:

Managed lanes are part of a regional strategy to reduce congestion by using variable pricing to provide a consistent 50-mph rate of travel. If it weren't for managed lanes, even a rebuilt DFW Connector would eventually become congested. By managing demand, users will be able to choose whether to use the lanes to ensure a reliable trip. Those who use the four-mile managed lane section will pay an average of 16 cents per mile when the project opens, thereby reducing congestion in the general purpose lanes.

That 16 cent figure, however, isn't a guarantee. The rates will be higher during busy times and lower in the dead of night. The regional toll policy puts a 75 cents per mile "soft cap" on managed lane rates, but it's called a "soft" cap because it can be busted if higher rates are needed to keep the tolled traffic thin enough to guarantee the 50 mile per hour speeds.

FHWA Administrator Victor Mendez will announce a new nationwide initiative, with impact in Texas, though spokeswoman Singer said no details about that were being released until Wednesday.

My sense is that **we'll know more about the TIGER grants**, which in this area means we'll know whether we get money for **streetcar / trolley plans**, for **Deadman's Curve** in Dallas, and the Tower 55 freight rail improvements in Fort Worth.

I am going to be surprised if we snag money for the street cars or Deadman's Curve.