

# No state bond funds for Fort Worth interchange

Posted Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009

BY GORDON DICKSON

[gdickson@star-telegram.com](mailto:gdickson@star-telegram.com)

The Texas Transportation Commission declined Thursday to spend part of a \$2 billion highway bond fund on the Interstate 35W/Loop 820 interchange in north Fort Worth despite complaints from North Texas officials that they are being punished for building toll roads.

The five commissioners said they are following the Legislature's wishes in spending this batch of Proposition 12 bond funds, approved by voters statewide in 2007, on nontoll projects. The interchange is one of several projects with toll lanes being planned in Dallas-Fort Worth.

As a result, only \$126 million is set aside for North Texas — home to about a third of the state's population and economy.

But many other worthwhile projects missed out on funding, too, Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said, noting that the state received a whopping \$9 billion in requests.

"This exercise is perhaps the most impactful yet on the extreme lack of resources we have available to meet our needs in Texas," said Meadows, who was unable to persuade other commissioners to spend more of the money in the Metroplex. "We have got to find a way to bring more resources to the table. We will fail in Texas if we don't do so."

The Proposition 12 package was approved unanimously after Meadows was promised that the commission would receive, by January, a detailed briefing of how to pay for expanding the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange in Fort Worth, I-35E in Dallas and U.S. 77 in South Texas.

## Money goes south

Last week, Regional Transportation Council officials said the area was being shortchanged for aggressively pursuing toll projects in recent years to make up for a lack of state funds.

"There is a perception of punishment among some elected leaders in Dallas-Fort Worth," Collin County Commissioner Joe Jaynes told the Transportation Commission during a meeting in Austin.

But North Texas officials who traveled to Austin on Thursday were outnumbered by members of Congress, the Legislature and other public offices who rose one by one to praise the commission for the way it chose Proposition 12 projects.

The money will be used on the expansion of I-35 in the Belton, Hillsboro and Waco areas, and other projects in the Houston and San Antonio metro areas. Some money was awarded to projects that served as statewide connectors, while others were rehabilitation projects. But the biggest chunk went to congestion relief projects in metro areas.

## Private developer

After Thursday's action, the fate of the I-35W expansion in north Fort Worth is now in the hands of a private developer. The I-35W/Loop 820 interchange is part of a massive project that the Transportation Department has dubbed the North Tarrant Express.

A private consortium led by the U.S. arm of Spain-based Cintra is working on a \$2 billion plan to rebuild freeway lanes and add managed toll lanes. That project includes Northeast Loop 820 in Haltom City and North Richland Hills and Texas 121/183 in Bedford, Euless and Hurst.

Negotiations are in high gear with the Cintra-led development group, known as NTE Mobility Partners, to expand the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange within just a few years, said John Barton, Transportation Department assistant executive director. Results will be announced in January.

That would be a change from the original timeline by NTE Mobility Partners, which planned to rebuild the \$300 million interchange no sooner than 2017.

*GORDON DICKSON, 817-390-7796*