

FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

LOCAL NEWS

State looks at what work needs to be done to Interstate 35

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EULESS -- The Trans Texas Corridor plan is dead, but motorists must still face the fact that billions of dollars of road work remains to be done along the Interstate 35 corridor.

The Texas Department of Transportation is still stinging from public criticism of its plans to build the Trans Texas Corridor -- the now-mothballed proposal to create a statewide network of toll roads to relieve truck and car traffic. The first leg of the Trans Texas Corridor plan was to be a new toll road, running roughly parallel to I-35 from Dallas-Fort Worth to San Antonio.

Now, the transportation department is trying a new tact. State leaders are turning to cities, counties and others at the ground level of government, in an attempt to get locals to help the state identify what the needs are from one end of I-35 to the other -- a 500-mile stretch across Texas.

On Tuesday, about a dozen of those locals gathered in Euless to take a close look at what road projects are already planned on the northernmost portion of I-35 in Texas, from Interstate 30 in Dallas and Fort Worth to the Oklahoma border.

Some are new to the subject. Others, such as former McKinney mayor Bill Whitfield have been hearing about the need for road improvements for years. Whitfield is an old hand at viewing aerial maps of the region's road grid — and he harbors a healthy dose of skepticism whether the latest I-35 planning effort will lead to any new funding sources.

"I'm not opposed to this helicopter view," he said. "We need these roads. But when I listen to people running for office, and when I listen to people in Austin, I don't hear that we're going to get funding for doodle."

In North Texas, the study area includes not only work on I-35, I-35W and I-35E, but dozens of connecting federal and state highways.

"The important thing is, now it's a ground-up approach," said Peter LeCody, executive administrator of Texas Rail Advocates. LeCody lives in the Dallas area, but he often advocates for transportation improvements in the Fort Worth area as well.

LeCody is a member of an Interstate 35 corridor advisory committee, which was the brainchild of Texas Transportation Commission member Bill Meadows of Fort Worth. Meadows, having arrived at the state transportation department in 2008 after the Trans Texas Corridor debacle had essentially run its course. Meadows proposed that the state's transportation needs instead be looked at from the bottom up.

Meadows suggested that small groups be formed in different localities and that those groups would identify the needs along I-35, without concern about such needs would be funded. Their findings would then present their findings to the state.

Meadows said a similar approach had worked at the Texas Water Development Board, which plans, tracks and makes loans to help with the state's long-term water needs. It's an effort dubbed "MY 35."

About 22 people from Tarrant, Dallas, Grayson, Parker, Wise and other counties are charged with identifying those needs in North Texas. On Tuesday, they gathered at a transportation department area office in Euless and identified work that is schedule to be done on I-35 over the next few decades, as well as a few projects that aren't currently being considered.

Community leaders looked at a number of planned, and unplanned, projects. Among their findings were:

- The concept of an 210-mile outer loop surrounding Fort Worth and Dallas should remain in the plan. An outer loop was originally part of the Trans Texas Corridor plan.

"The outer loop needs to be in the plan, but we don't want to build the outer loop until we've made improvements to I-35," said Jeffrey Neal, a program manager with the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Neal added that regional planners no longer believe that an outer loop can pay for itself by charging motorists tolls, and that the project needs to take its place among the long list of projects awaiting funding.

- While Tarrant County officials continue to push for expansion of I-35W from downtown Fort Worth to the Alliance Airport area, Denton County officials need to press for eventual I-35W expansion from Alliance to the I-35E merge just south of U.S. 380.

- Expansion of U.S. 377 from Denton to Pilot Point to east of Gainesville would create a needed north-south commuting route. Currently, that expansion isn't on any agency's planning radar.

- Expansion of I-35 in Denton from U.S. 380 to the Cooke County line is tentatively scheduled by 2030, although no funding has been identified.

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