

YOUR COMMUTE

Local money must cover cost overruns for Grapevine highway project

Posted Thursday, May. 13, 2010

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ARLINGTON -- Local money must be used to cover any cost overruns on the \$1 billion freeway project under way in [Grapevine](#), because the Texas Department of Transportation did not include a contingency for unforeseen expenses in its budget, officials said Thursday.

Members of the Regional Transportation Council were alarmed to learn that they would need to chip in \$7.5 million to create a small contingency for the project, known as the DFW Connector, and avoid construction delays. Nonetheless they unanimously agreed to set aside \$7.5 million in federal mobility dollars -- funds that could have been spent on road work in other cities.

"Is this a policy change or a one-time thing?" asked Paul Wageman, a council member from Plano who is chairman of the North Texas Tollway Authority.

For now, the contingency applies just to the DFW Connector, but it could mean that local money would have to be spent on future highway projects as well, officials said.

State transportation officials have changed the way they set budgets for projects, said Bob Brown, the Transportation Department's manager of comprehensive development agreements in [Dallas-Fort Worth](#). No longer are large contingencies of up to 10 percent of a project's overall cost routinely put into the budget, a practice that some state lawmakers have criticized because it encouraged contractors to charge higher fees.

The dispute over cost overruns is the latest in a long saga involving a lack of funding to properly overhaul the congested highways in Grapevine, one of the region's most gridlocked corridors.

The \$1 billion DFW Connector project, which includes a renovation of the Texas 114/121 corridor in Grapevine, was originally estimated to cost \$1.5 billion. But after several years of negotiations, the state has hired a developer, NorthGate Constructors, to build as much of the project as possible -- \$1 billion worth, including \$250 million in federal stimulus funds -- by 2015.

In recent weeks, state officials have added about \$10 million in changes to a portion near D/FW Airport's north entrance, although they've also trimmed \$5 million through engineering savings. Still, faced with a \$5 million funding gap, state officials opted to ask the transportation council to step up with funds to cover that immediate need, plus \$2.5 million for any future expenses.

Michael Morris, transportation director with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said he would meet with state transportation officials later this month to talk about whether any other local funds would be needed for area projects.

Transportation council members say they want assurances that they'll eventually get their money back, noting that they've begrudgingly allowed toll lanes to be built in the region to help the state Transportation Department meet its needs statewide.

"I'm concerned this region helped itself come up with funds, and we're being leaned on," said Frisco Mayor Maher Maso.

Once the DFW Connector is complete, the transportation council's \$7.5 million will be repaid from proceeds on the toll lanes being built in the medians. Those lanes will allow motorists to pay a toll to go full-speed through Grapevine. New free lanes are also being added.

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