

## YOUR COMMUTE

# Private company proposes tearing down and rebuilding part of I-35W

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A toll road developer has offered to tear down and rebuild 10 miles of Interstate 35W from downtown to far north Fort Worth to relieve one of [Tarrant County's](#) biggest bottlenecks with a combination of toll and nontoll lanes.

The proposal by NTE Mobility Partners, submitted this week to the Texas Department of Transportation, would allow motorists to pay their way out of congestion on toll lanes that would extend from Interstate 30 near downtown to North Tarrant Parkway, south of [Alliance Airport](#).

For motorists who can't or don't want to pay tolls, the project would include reconstruction of existing nontoll lanes, continuous frontage roads, improvements to access ramps and an end to those pesky left-lane exits at the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange. Federal and state law generally requires existing nontoll interstate lanes to remain free, although toll lanes can be added.

Months of negotiations are likely needed before it becomes clear whether state officials will approve the project. But the developer has said that, if its offer is accepted, the \$2.7 billion project could be open to traffic by June 30, 2017.

"With the new proposed configuration, the project will result in over 1.5 million hours saved annually by moving drivers from congested roads to free-flowing lanes," according to an executive summary of the report released Thursday afternoon.

### Obstacles

But while the I-35W plan may be the best and perhaps only chance of fixing the interstate for at least the next 10 years -- state officials and lawmakers say they'll run out of gasoline-tax-supported funds to build *any* roads by 2012 -- the proposal promises to be controversial on many levels:

Tarrant County residents may be growing intolerant of toll roads as a solution to seemingly every mobility problem in the western Metroplex. Toll projects are already under way on Texas 114/121 in Grapevine, Airport Freeway and Loop 820 in Northeast Tarrant County, and Southwest Parkway in Fort Worth.

The I-35W developer is overseeing the Airport Freeway/Loop 820 project, known as North Tarrant Express.

The I-35W project does not have environmental clearance and, although the federal government is expected to sign off on it by early next year, there's always a chance it could be delayed by an unforeseen environmental problem. In any case, dirt won't turn on I-35W until that paperwork is filed.

NTE Mobility Partners, which is led by the U.S. arm of Spain-based Cintra, says that while it will bring outside money to the table to pay for most of the construction and maintenance, it will need some public funds.

The executive summary calls for the Transportation Department to inject \$287.5 million in public funds, although later it explains that a scaled-back version of the plan could be done for \$173.8 million in public funds.

Officials with NTE Mobility Partners declined Thursday to elaborate on those costs, which are expected to be detailed during a Texas Transportation Commission workshop Wednesday in Austin.

They're also not elaborating on how they plan to handle the tens of thousands of cars and trucks that use the corridor each day. I-35W is not only a popular commuting corridor in Fort Worth but also a primary route for commercial traffic between Mexico and Canada.

Detouring traffic won't be easy at several points. I-35W has large bridges spanning the Trinity River and two sets of freight railroad tracks.

"We'll look at it," Transportation Department spokesman Christopher Lippincott said. "The project remains a priority. But the issue will be: What additional investment can the public make?"

This week, state officials ordered sweeping cuts of about 5 percent in most agencies to balance the budget. The Transportation Department, which operates mostly on gasoline tax revenue, was mostly spared from the belt-tightening on the general fund.

But state lawmakers might frown upon an additional nine-figure contribution to Tarrant County highways -- already the beneficiaries of more than \$400 million in federal Recovery Act funding last year.

Lawmakers have also banned future deals with private developers to build toll roads -- known as comprehensive development agreements. The I-35W project was one of just a few such agreements exempted from that ban.

The deals allow developers to collect tolls for up to 52 years under a long-term lease arrangement and keep whatever profits they can draw in exchange for paying road construction costs upfront. Developers must also maintain the roads during that time.

Now that the proposal has been submitted, the Transportation Department has 30 days to decide whether the I-35W corridor is ready for development and then several more months to negotiate a contract with NTE Mobility Partners.

It could be a year before the I-35W makeover is deemed viable.

"This is just a first step in this procurement process. There's a ways to go," NTE Mobility Partners spokesman Robert Hinkle said.

Big value

Despite those remaining obstacles, supporters say the project holds tremendous value.

The state has about \$150 million in Proposition 14 bond funds, which the Legislature approved for mobility projects, that could be applied to the project. The 20-year bonds can be repaid with future gas tax revenue and could be used to fund construction of the nontoll portions of the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange.

Texas Transportation Commission member Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said he hopes that residents look at the potential benefits of the project as a whole, not just at the toll lanes.

"I strongly believe that if there's a toll element, there's also got to be a free option," Meadows said. "I'm very appreciative of having received a proposal. I'm excited to have something to work with. This potentially represents a way to address a major transportation problem in the Metroplex."

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