

Fort Worth interchange makeover is a must

Posted Thursday, Jun. 10, 2010

Mike Berry has been saying the same thing for months, and he's right. Expanding and improving Interstate 35W from downtown Fort Worth to North Tarrant Parkway, including the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange, is essential.

And now he's added another line: Trying to make do with a scaled-down interchange makeover won't do.

"That's throwing good money after bad," says Berry, the president of Hillwood Properties.

Of course, Berry has a vested interest in these improvements. His company is the developer of Alliance Texas, and the work would provide enhanced access to that far north Fort Worth development.

But he's still right. Besides that, nobody can argue about the value Alliance Texas has brought to the Tarrant County economy: 28,000 jobs since 1990.

In particular, Berry is right about a proposed cheaper version of the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange redo. That proposal would leave some of the current bothersome and quite dangerous left-lane exits in place, a design that isn't suitable for today's traffic load.

Funding to rebuild the interchange has long been the key hang-up in starting the work on I-35W. By now, local residents should be used to the idea that work of this magnitude will involve toll lanes, like it or not.

A developer, NTE Mobility Partners, led by the U.S. arm of the Spanish company Cintra, has offered to invest \$2.7 billion to rebuild the 10 miles of existing freeway lanes and add two toll lanes in each direction, plus fix the interchange with no left-lane exits and pay maintenance costs for 52 years in exchange for the toll revenue collected during that time.

The problem is that NTE wants the state to invest \$287.5 million. Everything seemed set to go in March, with part of the public money to come in the form of \$150 million in bond funds approved by the Legislature.

But the Texas Transportation Commission balked at the bond money allocation, apparently trying to push NTE to come up with more private cash.

Now the next shoe has fallen. NTE has cut its request for state money to \$173.8 million, but that means the left-lane exits from northbound and southbound I-35W to Loop 820 will remain. The proposal also would scale back on some access roads.

Further complicating the matter is that now is the best time to move on this project. State money originally wasn't scheduled for it until 2018, and the Texas Department of Transportation says it could run out of all tax-based financing for new roads by 2012.

The need for this project is great -- just ask commuters from far north Fort Worth who drive I-35W every day or those who negotiate the freeway's near-constant backups downtown. NTE is scheduled to start work later this year on similar improvements to Loop 820 itself and to Airport Freeway in Hurst, Bedford and Euless.

From here, the whole thing looks like a lot of high-stakes bargaining between the Transportation Department and NTE.

That's fine; the public servants in Austin should be doing their best for the people of North Texas and the state as a whole to get the most private investment possible in exchange for tolls.

It's not the intent here to chip away at the state's bargaining position. But from the point of view of Tarrant County drivers, a full, modern reconstruction of the I-35W/Loop 820 interchange should not be a negotiating point.

If savings are a must, bright minds on both sides of the table can find dollars elsewhere.

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