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In north Fort Worth, full funding urged for I-35W interchange

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Business leaders in far north Fort Worth aren't satisfied with the compromise plan for partial expansion of the interchange at Interstate 35W and Northeast Loop 820.

It would be foolish to rebuild the interchange but not remove the dangerous left-lane exits, as proposed by a developer, Hillwood Properties President Mike Berry said Wednesday.

"That's throwing good money after bad," Berry told members of the 35W Coalition, a group of political and business leaders.

Several coalition members vowed to write letters asking state lawmakers and the Texas Transportation Department to fully fund the project -- and get rid of the left-lane exits and other dangerous features in the congested I-35W corridor.

The developer, NTE Mobility Partners, has said that it could rebuild existing I-35W lanes and add four toll lanes and pay all maintenance costs for 52 years -- a \$2.7 billion investment -- if the state can kick in \$287.5 million in public funds.

But the Transportation Department has said it cannot come up with the full share. So the developer has offered a compromise. For \$173.8 million in public funds, the developer could remove left-lane exits connecting westbound Loop 820 to southbound I-35W, and eastbound Loop 820 to northbound I-35W.

But left-lane exits would remain for traffic from northbound I-35W to westbound Loop 820, and from southbound I-35W to eastbound Loop 820.

However, motorists using the four proposed toll lanes would have direct connections between I-35W and Loop 820 in any direction.

That proposal offers too many improvements for toll-paying customers and not enough for those unable or unwilling to pay tolls, critics say.

State officials are expected to decide in two to three months whether to fully or partially fund the project, said Russell Laughlin, senior vice president of Hillwood Properties, which developed the Alliance Texas project.

Laughlin issued an impassioned call to action Wednesday to 35W Coalition members, saying that if the region misses this chance to expand the I-35W corridor, "10 years from now businesses will be drying up because you won't be able to get people in here."

One of the letter writers will be Rich Bean, who drives I-35W daily and is a regional director for Lane Construction in Roanoke. "People would generally prefer not to have a toll road, but if it is our only option, we need to band together," he said.

If the developer's idea is accepted, the I-35W improvements would become part of the \$2 billion North Tarrant Express project, which is expected to begin by fall and includes expansion of Northeast Loop 820 and Airport Freeway in Northeast Tarrant County.

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