

NORTHEAST TARRANT

Facebook and Twitter may be used to inform people about highway construction

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BY GORDON DICKSON

gdickson@star-telegram.com

The private developer responsible for rebuilding Northeast Loop 820 and Texas 121/183 in Tarrant County is working on a strategy that may include Facebook, Twitter and text messaging to keep commuters informed about the project during an estimated five years of construction.

Work on the \$2 billion project could begin as early as next year if the Federal Highway Administration approves an environmental study as expected this fall. The job includes rebuilding existing lanes and adding four toll lanes on Loop 820 and Airport Freeway. Continuous frontage roads would also be added.

While commuters have eagerly awaited improvements to congested highways in Northeast Tarrant County, the complicated project is sure to cause orange-barrel-related headaches for drivers, making it crucial to keep motorists informed about progress, said Robert Hinkle, director of corporate affairs for the North Tarrant Express project.

"We're going to have to figure out how to communicate our message, including the use of social media," Hinkle said to members of the 35W Coalition on Wednesday. He later added that text messaging and Internet tools such as Facebook and Twitter may be used to spread the word about lane closures and detours.

The 35W Coalition, a group of business and political leaders, meets quarterly to track progress on efforts to expand roads in north Tarrant County, particularly between downtown Fort Worth, Alliance Airport and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

Hinkle was hired this year to become the local face of North Tarrant Express Mobility Partners, a group of companies led by Spain-based Cintra that was awarded the contract to expand Northeast Loop 820, Texas 121/183 and eventually Interstate 35W. Cintra has leased office space in North Richland Hills.

Hinkle grew up in Northeast Tarrant County and graduated in 1975 from Haltom High School. He now lives in Mansfield and has worked in the corporate communications field in Austin, Washington and abroad.

The work is expected to be funded with \$570 million in state highway money and about \$1.4 billion in private investment. NTE Mobility Partners would keep proceeds collected on the toll lanes through March 2061.

NTE Mobility Partners has leased office space in the Frost Bank building at 9001 Airport Freeway and brought in Belen Marcos from the Chicago Skyway and Indiana Toll Road projects to serve as chief executive of North Tarrant Express.