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Broke Texas Turns to Private Toll Roads

Private investors to build large-scale for-profit toll roads in North Texas

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Faced with growing highway congestion and a lack of tax money for road projects, [Texas](#) is turning to a group of investors to build private toll roads as a way to ease the gridlock.

Construction is set to start soon on two such projects -- the North Tarrant Express along Loop 820 and Highways 183 and 121 in Tarrant County and the LBJ Express along Highway 635 in North Dallas.

Critics say the move amounts to a privatization of an essential government function -- building and maintaining highways -- and that drivers will end up paying far more in the long run.

Backers of the idea say the state has few other options in a time of whopping budget deficits.

"We provide the funding to actually build this project," said [Robert Hinkle](#), spokesman for NTE Mobility Partners, which represents a number of companies involved in the project. "We bring it to fruition in less than five years, we open the road, we manage it and operate it for the 52-year contract."

The state does provide roughly a quarter of the upfront money, he said.

The investors, led by a Spanish company called Cintra, collect the tolls over those 52 years and keep the profits.

Critics such as state Rep. Lon Burnam say the government should build highways for the public good, not private businesses looking to make a profit.

"It is ridiculous for us to be going to a corporation out of Spain to address our transportation needs," said Burnam, a Democrat from [Fort Worth](#). "The problem is, how do we pay for an adequate transportation system? Most people don't want to pay the taxes, either. So a lot of my fellow elected officials have opted for what I think is a really bad idea, and that is the privatization of our road system."

Southern Methodist University economics professor [Bud Weinstein](#) concluded in a report several years ago that a private toll road would cost more than a public one, but now he says Texas is left with few options.

"In certain circumstances, private toll roads may be the only way to go," Weinstein said.

"Essentially for the next couple of years, there is just going to be a dearth of public money to go into highway construction."

The private toll roads will be something drivers in [North Texas](#) have never seen, with several differences from the public toll roads that have been around for years.

The new private toll lanes will be built alongside the free ones, so drivers will actually have a choice: Congested free lanes or the tolled lanes with no delays.

The price of the tolls will also vary depending on demand: The more congestion, the higher the toll.

"What it will do, essentially, is keep traffic moving in those managed lanes 50 miles an hour," Hinkle said. "That's your guarantee. You might pay a little higher price to keep moving at 50 miles an hour, but you'll keep moving consistently at 50 miles an hour."

The North Tarrant Express will be built along a 13-mile stretch of North Loop 820 in North Richland Hills, from Interstate 35W. It will continue past the Northeast Mall to Highways 183 and 121 and end where those highways split.

The LBJ Express will run along Highway 635, from just west of Interstate 35E to just east of Central Expressway.

"They are going to make a lot of money off of us," Burnam said.

But backers of the idea say without the private toll roads, Texans right now have no other choice -- except to raise taxes, which is politically unpopular -- or more gridlock.

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