

DMN: NTTA may consider higher rush-hour toll rates

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ARLINGTON – Toll rates could go up during rush hour on some [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) roads under an idea floated Thursday by the region's top transportation planner.

[Michael Morris](#), transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said the prospect of higher rates during rush hour could lower NTTA's interest costs. That would make it easier for NTTA to finish State Highway 161 in Dallas County and build the 28-mile Southwest Parkway in Tarrant County.

Those two roads have been at the center of months of negotiations between the toll authority and the Texas Department of Transportation, and the talks may be nearing a breakthrough, officials said Thursday at a briefing before the Regional Transportation Council.

But a key sticking point has been NTTA's request that the state agree to cover any payments on the two roads' debt should revenue trail minimum expectations. The backstop would give the NTTA a lower interest rate and save up to \$410 million in financing costs.

But if NTTA would instead agree, Morris said, to automatically raise rates on rush-hour drivers in the event that overall revenues were too low, that would limit the state's risk of having to make those payments.

Officials hope to have an agreement on how NTTA will build both roads before its governing board and the Texas Transportation Commission by January.

Morris also said higher rush-hour rates on those two roads would only be fair, given that the deal struck to finance the [Sam Rayburn](#) Tollway in Denton and Collin counties already includes a clause that will send rush-hour rates up should traffic get too heavy.

"Why should we treat drivers in Denton County any differently than drivers in Dallas or Tarrant counties?" Morris asked Thursday.

Rising rates

After keeping its toll rates low for decades, NTTA has begun steadily increasing tolls on its roads ever since it borrowed some \$5 billion as part of its bid to win the Sam Rayburn Tollway contract. To keep the project out of the hands of a private toll company, and with heavy encouragement of the Regional Transportation Council, NTTA agreed to adopt an aggressive pricing strategy that considers tolls as a perpetual means of producing revenue to pay for other roads, both tolled and free.

Toll rates jumped 23 percent Sept. 1 and are 14.5 cents per mile. They will automatically increase 5.6 percent every two years.

The idea of charging drivers more when they need toll roads the most is not new. When the new LBJ Freeway opens in 2016, for instance, the six private toll lanes that will be added will be priced according to demand. The highest toll rates will be reserved for rush hour.

But that road, and a similar private toll project called the North Tarrant Express, will feature both free lanes and tolled lanes side by side, giving drivers a choice, albeit perhaps a Hobson's choice.

Applying higher tolls for rush hour on a toll road such as SH 161 would only give drivers a choice between using the paid highway or finding another route.

Under a separate agreement for the Sam Rayburn Tollway, rates could jump as much as 17 percent during rush hour after January 2012.

No rush for other roads

Morris said it's too early to know whether rush-hour pricing should be adopted more widely. He said the concept would first need to be studied in pilot programs, probably once SH 161 is completed.

But he said the specific idea floated Thursday was tied directly to securing an agreement on the financing for SH 161 and Southwest Parkway. If it's not needed for those projects to go forward, it won't be pursued, he said.

Still, NTTA leaders said Thursday that they would have to consider the idea if the state makes that a prerequisite for backstopping its loans.

"Yes, it's something we'd consider. If we're going to continue to develop toll projects in lieu of roads being built by gas tax dollars, then we will have to consider every option," vice chairman Victor Vandergriff said.

Even if NTTA agrees, the rush-hour pricing would only kick in if revenue fell below expectations, officials said.

NTTA chairman Paul Wageman said there are no plans to consider adopting rush-hour pricing to Dallas North Tollway or the Bush Turnpike.