

# NTTA leaders fear Dallas area's toll road push moving too fast

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As the Dallas area rushes forward in pursuit of more toll roads, warnings that it may be doing so at its own peril have been emanating from an unexpected corner: the top leaders of the [North Texas Tollway Authority](#).

Even as the NTTA enters the final weeks of negotiations that all sides expect will conclude by Feb. 28 with a multibillion-dollar deal to build two new giant toll projects in Dallas and Tarrant counties, the agency's two top board members have been warning that the region may be moving too fast on toll roads.

"People are going to realize that every new road in the metroplex is going to be a toll road," NTTA vice chairman Victor Vandergriff said at a recent meeting of the NTTA board.

He was only exaggerating a little.

The Regional Transportation Council approves a 25-year plan for area transportation projects every five years – and the current plan has included a map with precious few free roads. Roads paid for with taxes have emerged as something of a luxury, one that the RTC no longer sees as affordable, given the rising needs and insufficient funds from Austin and Washington.

A new plan is in the works now, and officials say it could shift away from tolls.

But for now, tolls are fast becoming the dominant way local officials hope to move Dallas area residents from one place to another.

The NTTA already manages three major toll roads – the [Sam Rayburn](#) Tollway, the Bush Turnpike, and its oldest and still most lucrative, the Dallas North Tollway – and is collecting tolls on the first stages of a fourth, State Highway 161 in Dallas County.

Over the next six weeks or so, NTTA is expected to reach an agreement with the state Department of Transportation to complete Highway 161 and build the Southwest Parkway and Chisholm Trail toll roads in Tarrant County. A major expansion of the Bush Turnpike is under way now, and officials in Dallas continue to hope that NTTA will build the Trinity Parkway near downtown. State officials have said they want to add new tolled lanes to Interstate 35 between Dallas to Denton, as a means to pay for the expansion of that highway.

In addition, two major private toll roads, the region's first, are expected to begin construction during the next 18 months. The Spanish toll road developer Cintra has teamed with other investors to rebuild LBJ Freeway in Dallas and Interstate 820 and State Highway 183 in Tarrant County, and will add what will probably be the costliest toll lanes in Texas on each.

Both toll projects are expected to be completed by 2016 or sooner.

"Even our free roads will soon have a toll component," Vandergriff said.

Both Vandergriff and NTTA chairman Paul Wageman, who has also voiced reservations about the extent of tolling in Dallas, say toll roads are essential as Texas tries to keep traffic moving in the fifth-largest metropolitan area in the U.S.

But they worry that adding too many tolls, too quickly, could erode the one thing that makes them such a valuable tool in the first place: the willingness of drivers to pay their tolls.

"I do have concerns ... that the public will only tolerate a certain amount of tolling," Wageman told reporters at a news briefing in Arlington earlier this month. "We understand that to get the roads built, there is going to be a tolling component [to help pay for them]. But we are concerned because ultimately we must have public receptivity to tolling. We do not want to be in a position where that receptivity goes away, as that ultimately affects the business we are in."

Toll roads remain a daily trade-off for hundreds of thousands of NTTA customers, who pay to save valuable time getting to work or the airport or to a meeting after school.

But will they remain popular, in the face of rising rates and as they spread to every corner of the region?

Vandergriff and Wageman voiced their worries separately this month as negotiations over Southwest Parkway and Highway 161 accelerated and brought into focus the debt required to build those roads, on top of the \$7 billion NTTA already owes.

All that debt will be paid for by tolls – and if the tolls don't produce enough revenue to satisfy bondholders, the rates would probably have to jump, just as they did earlier this year when NTTA increased rates by about 23 percent.

But raising rates will only work if enough drivers are willing to pay the higher rates to offset those who abandon the toll roads.

Already, some drivers have begun shunning the turnpikes.

Nathan Maxfield, a 35-year-old Web designer, used the Dallas North Tollway when he lived in Frisco and worked in Addison. But he began cutting back even before he moved to Plano.

In September, he started a [Facebook](#) group called People Against the NTTA.

Only about 60 others have joined his group, but Maxfield said frustration with NTTA's rates is a common theme among his friends and colleagues.

"It was just the rising costs, and toll roads were just spreading everywhere you looked," Maxfield said, explaining why he created the group. "It seemed like pretty soon, we wouldn't be able to get anywhere without paying a toll."

#### A WAY TO SPEAK OUT

The North Central Texas Council of Governments is seeking input on how **to shape the region's transportation network** over the next 25 years and will literally redraw the map that for the past five years has shown nearly every new road as a toll road.

If the map for the so-called **2035 Plan** is to look any different from the 2030 Plan, it will likely require a mix of new taxes, new approaches, and more rail.

Michael Morris, transportation director for the council of governments, just completed a series of public hearings, and written suggestions are encouraged. **Send them to [mobilityplan@nctcog.org](mailto:mobilityplan@nctcog.org).**