

Business Press

Progress – and setbacks – for area transportation in 2009

BY LESLIE WIMMER

December 28, 2009

In 2009, the Local Option effort died in the state legislature, but a number of North Texas transportation projects still managed to find funding and come out of planning stages.

The DFW Connector, State Highway 161, the Southwest Parkway, Fort Worth's streetcar system, and the first phase of the North Tarrant Express finding funding were 2009's biggest transit events, said Russell Laughlin, vice president of Hillwood Properties and transportation chair of the 35W Coalition.

"Those legacy projects for Tarrant County have essentially been on the books for two decades at least, in most cases certainly 10 to 15 years of hard preparation for all of them," he said. "And the fact that we were able to – the state, region and county – to, through stimulus, design/build, through alternative funding, get each of these projects in a position where they can be completed is absolutely the biggest."

NTE Mobility partners, the firm leading construction of the first 13-mile phase of the North Tarrant Express, announced Dec. 17 it received early funding clearance and expected to begin construction on expanding and rebuilding state highways 121 and 183 and Interstate Loop 820 in late 2010.

Fort Worth's streetcar system received initial funding from a number of sources, including the federal government, the city of Fort Worth, and the Regional Transportation Council.

The second biggest transit event of 2009, Laughlin said, was the failure of the Texas Local Option Transportation Act in the 81st Legislative Session.

"You lose ground to make ground," Laughlin said, adding that "the very positive reaction of statewide legislators and private sector business folks to our legislators" was a good sign for future movement on a revamped version of the bill.

In the future, the Local Option bill will be revised with a new name and new strategy, said State Sen. Wendy Davis of Fort Worth. Davis said she doesn't expect the Texas Local Option Transportation Act to reappear in the same form for the 2011 legislative session.

“I don’t think we’ll see TLOTA again, I think we’ll see a proposed solution that will look more like a statewide solution, as it should be,” Davis said. “I think transportation is going to occupy a tremendous amount of our focus [in the 2011 legislative session], simply because if we don’t resolve our transportation problems, we can’t stimulate the job growth in the state that we need to continue to stimulate.”

Laughlin agreed, adding that a funding mechanism for the statewide version of the Local Option bill will be worked through in 2010, and a new name will come along soon for the revised bill. But, ultimately, Laughlin said, getting enough support from legislators will be a challenge.

“There’s always going to be those who are against new fees, new taxes, whatever it is,” he said. “That’s an easy thing to stand up and say ‘no’ against. And, that’s where the private sector really has to take a much more high-profile lead this time around.”

Laughlin said gaining support for the bill in the private sector will come as more business and community leaders talk to employees and residents about economic development, jobs and growing business, he said.

On a larger scale, the biggest transportation challenge in 2010 and beyond is likely to be funding, Laughlin said.

“If you have current projects today, there is no money. It doesn’t exist,” he said.

With the Texas Department of Transportation’s coffers running dry and bond dollars falling short of expectations in North Texas, Laughlin said, public-private partnerships and toll projects are likely to pick up over the next few years.

One local public-private project, the North Tarrant Express, is already seeing forward movement on funding.

NTE Mobility Partners, the firm in charge of redevelopment and expansion of the roadways included in the project, hit financial close on the North Tarrant Express’ first phase ahead of schedule, and announced in December a goal to start construction in late 2010.

The funding “announcement by NTE Mobility Partners is great news for North Texas drivers and for Texas job creation,” said Bill Hammond, president and CEO of the Texas Association of Business, in a statement. “It’s also proof positive that public-private partnerships work and are a vital tool in building critical roadway

projects. Ensuring that we have needed roadway capacity in Texas is paramount to keep our economy moving.”

The 13-mile, first phase of the North Tarrant Express project includes improvements and the addition of managed toll lanes along Interstate Loop 820 and state highways 121 and 183.