

## Fort Worth may allow 60-mph speed limit on Southwest Parkway

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Drivers on Southwest Parkway may not be limited to 50 mph after all.

After years of fighting to keep the speed limit 50 mph on the planned toll road — to reduce traffic and noise in nearby neighborhoods — Fort Worth officials are reluctantly considering raising it to 60 mph to make the project more affordable.

The speed limit has emerged as a prickly issue as city and state officials struggle to pay for the \$1.8 billion, 29-mile toll road from downtown Fort Worth to Cleburne. They're trying to work out a funding deal and get the road under construction within a year, and perhaps partly opened in about three years.

"We're not doing anything that changes the character of that road," said Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan, whose district includes the path of Southwest Parkway.

He noted that city officials spent several months in 2004-05 negotiating the 50 mph speed limit for a four- to five-mile stretch from Interstate 30 to the future Arborlawn Drive interchange, as well as architectural and landscaping details to make the road more a parkway and less a concrete monstrosity.

"But if there is a value to the taxpayer to change the speed limit without changing the character of the road, we'll take a look at it," he said. "We want the financial numbers to work."

What does a speed limit have to do with the cost of a road? Put simply, people who drive on toll roads want to go fast, and many motorists might not bother spending their money — 20 cents per mile — on a 50 mph road. The less traffic that a road is projected to have, the harder it is to borrow money from investors to get it built.

### Decision time

A decision on how to finance the project must soon be reached. On Jan. 28 the Texas Transportation Commission will be briefed on what steps can be taken to make that happen. Supporters hope a deal can be finalized by February.

The commission and the North Texas Tollway Authority have tentatively agreed to work as partners in developing Southwest Parkway and a neighboring project, the Texas 161 toll road east of Arlington. The authority would be the builder, and the Transportation Department would allow state gas tax revenue to serve as collateral for money borrowed to build and maintain the roads.

Making up for the financial shortfall on Southwest Parkway is a lingering obstacle.

### \$100 million difference

Increasing the Southwest Parkway speed limit to 60 mph makes it feasible for the tollway authority to finance \$100 million more upfront than is otherwise possible, tollway Vice Chairman Victor Vandergriff of Arlington said.

"The bottom line on that is fairly staggering," he said.

Vandergriff was surprised to learn last week of Fort Worth's willingness to discuss raising the speed limit. A longtime advocate of raising the limit, Vandergriff said as recently as a few weeks ago that Fort Worth city leaders told him they still wanted 50 mph.

The tollway authority is nearly finished with the parkway's engineering and design plans, including curves and other obstacles that ensure a 50 mph speed limit. Some of those plans would have to be redrawn to accommodate going 10 mph faster, but the additional planning costs would be minimal compared to the long-term benefit, tollway authority Chairman Paul Wageman of Plano said.

The speed limit is an issue on the north end of the road, where it would run through an established, historic part of Fort Worth. From Arborlawn Drive to Farm Road 1187, the speed limit would be 60 mph; from there into Johnson County, the speed limit hasn't been set but could be 70 mph.

### Neighborhood impact

People who live near the path of the toll road will likely take the prospect of a higher speed limit in stride, said Cassie Hicks, president of the Alamo Heights neighborhood association.

Alamo Heights is wedged between I-30 and the Vickery Street railroad tracks, and many residents would have a view of Southwest Parkway right outside their door.

Hicks said she supports Southwest Parkway construction, and appreciates efforts that have been made to add landscaping and remove a potentially smelly toll plaza that had been planned for the area.

But she said residents are frustrated that the project, originally planned as a Texas 121 extension more than three decades ago, continues to drag.

"It seems 121 parkway is ever-changing and morphing into this, that and the other," she said.

"It doesn't surprise me they'd have to take another look at the speed limit."

But Hicks does worry that conceding the 50 mph speed limit will open the doors to other changes.

"I'm almost afraid that anything is fair game," she said. "In our little section, we've negotiated shrubbery, sidewalks and certain types of flowers and plants."

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