

Star-Telegram

Grapevine highway project will receive leftover stimulus funds

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ARLINGTON — The \$1 billion-plus makeover of Grapevine highways known as the DFW Connector could receive millions of extra construction dollars if other Texas metro areas aren't able to spend all of their federal stimulus funds.

The Regional Transportation Council on Friday agreed to designate the DFW Connector as the place in Dallas-Fort Worth where unspent Federal Recovery Act funds should go.

It's not yet known how much, if any, stimulus funds will be unspent statewide by a March 3 deadline, although in Dallas-Fort Worth all the stimulus money has already been obligated. As of late December, \$300 million statewide was still unspent, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Construction is scheduled to begin Feb. 15 on the DFW Connector, a massive project that includes expansion of Texas 114/121 near Dallas/Fort Worth Airport's north entrance.

Because the construction is being overseen by a private developer, NorthGate Constructors, new funds could quickly be plugged into the project without the Texas Department of Transportation having to advertise for new bids, officials said.

Some Texas metro areas submitted projects for stimulus funding that hadn't cleared federal environmental review, and may not be ready on time.

"If anybody in the state stubs their toes, we'll be happy to assist them, so that Texas doesn't send any funding back to the federal government," said Christie Jestis, program manager for the council of governments.

However, Maribel Chavez, Fort Worth district engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation, cautioned that it's unlikely that a large sum of money will be available. She predicted that metro areas with unspent funds will probably scramble to find ways to legally spend them, instead of just giving the dough to Dallas-Fort Worth.

Because the DFW Connector includes toll lanes in its medians, the state Transportation Department was allowed to hire a private developer to design and build the project simultaneously. The move makes it possible to make major changes to the project without going through a time-consuming competitive bidding process.

The DFW Connector, which also includes a massive expansion of nontoll lanes, was originally \$1.5 billion, but officials had to slash about a third of the project because of a lack of funds.

In other action Friday, the transportation council:

Ratified an agreement to build Southwest Parkway in Fort Worth and Texas 161 in Grand Prairie as a single project backed by state gas-tax funds, even though both projects are to be built by the North Texas Tollway Authority as toll roads. The approval, which came on a voice vote, came despite concerns aired by several council members that \$91 million in local funds are also being used to guarantee the tollway authority's debts in the project.

The Texas Transportation Commission will take a final vote on the project late next month. If it's approved, Southwest Parkway will be under construction by the end of the year.

Approved a list of Dallas-Fort Worth projects that are in line for an estimated \$67 million in federal transportation enhancement funds. Congress requires states to spend 10 percent of surface transportation formula funds on something other than highway lanes. Trails and historic preservation projects are often at the top of the list. Among the highest-ranking projects in the Metroplex is a proposal to add sidewalks in Southlake.

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