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Construction on DFW Connector officially starts Monday

Posted Sunday, Feb. 14, 2010



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GRAPEVINE -- Many residents and traffic-worn commuters in Grapevine were probably skeptical they'd live long enough to see the area's clogged highways fixed.

But that long-awaited moment is nigh.

On Monday, a four-year, \$1 billion makeover of highways in the Texas 114/121 corridor officially begins. It's a project with a nickname -- the DFW Connector -- and it entails tearing down, rebuilding and expanding eight miles of roadway squeezed between Lake Grapevine and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. And it signals the end of more than a decade of studying the project and scrambling to find money to build it.

Now, Grapevine residents and business owners must adjust their thinking. They must let go of the skepticism that has built up over the years, when they understandably wondered whether meaningful improvements would ever come to their freeways, and focus on how to cope with traffic delays, noise, dust and other byproducts of living in a huge highway work zone.

"I'm hoping it doesn't slow down traffic to where people don't come down Main Street," said Patty Wilson, who opened Patty Cakes Bakery and Catering on Main Street last year. "I really don't know what to expect."

Drivers should be prepared to deal with a 50 mph speed limit in work zones and occasional lane closures on nights and weekends, said officials with the Texas Transportation Department and NorthGate Constructors, its private development partner.

During the first few months, much of the work will center on improving the Main Street bridge over Texas 114, the primary gateway to Grapevine's historical downtown area, as well as building a southbound Texas 121 frontage road from Interstate 635 to Texan Trail.

Grapevine residents will also have to deal with increased traffic on city streets and thoroughfares as drivers seek shortcuts to get around the work zone, although project officials don't recommend such detours.

Streets most likely to be sought out by impatient motorists include Hall-Johnson Road and Mustang Drive on the south side and Dove Road, Kimball Road and Northwest Highway on the north side.

Ribbon-cutting

Although the project officially starts Monday, it probably won't ramp up to a full-fledged work zone for several weeks, said Jerry Hodge, Grapevine transportation projects director.

On Wednesday, Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez is scheduled to speak at a formal ribbon-cutting in Grapevine. He will likely mention the use of \$250 million in Recovery Act funding for the project -- the largest beneficiary of federal stimulus money for transportation in the country. It ended more than a decade of effort in Austin and Washington to raise dollars to build the project.

Meanwhile, workers will spend much of the next few days removing asbestos from the old Main Street bridge, which will be demolished and replaced in one of the plan's early phases. Workers will also remove trees and clear a path for the Texas 121 southbound frontage lanes.

No lane closures have been announced, although early in the project there may be some night closures on Texas 114/121 to accommodate work overhead on the Main Street overpass, NorthGate spokeswoman Selma Stockstill said.

The project is also unusual in that a private developer is managing the construction, leaving the Transportation Department to regulate from the sidelines. Because, in addition to the free lanes being added, two toll lanes are being built in each direction, the Transportation Department hired NorthGate to simultaneously design and build the project.

As a result, NorthGate can move freely from one portion of the project to the next without going through competitive bidding at each step.

Taking shortcuts

Giving NorthGate that kind of flexibility also means that motorists will have to be nimble, too, and not be surprised if several pieces of the project are under construction at once, even at opposite ends of the corridor.

But Grapevine residents say they're up to the challenge. While the city is relatively small, with 45,550 residents and an agrarian past, it is accustomed to big projects --- the construction of D/FW Airport in the late 1960s and early '70s; Grapevine Mills, Bass Pro Shops and the Dallas Cowboys Golf Club in the late 1990s and more recently the Gaylord Texan and Great Wolf Lodge megaresorts.

"We're quite aware of that and how the traffic is going to become more congested," said Dan Weinberger, who lives in northwest Grapevine and commutes three miles to work each day in the city center. He's accustomed to making that trip in seven minutes but he knows that soon it may take twice that long as residents seek to escape congestion on Texas 114/121 by using city streets.

"Even these smaller streets, like the ones I'm on, I expect to see traffic increase," said Weinberger, president of the Historic Downtown Grapevine Association and owner of Weinberger's Deli on Main. "And it's good, you know. The people who don't know about us will actually be forced to come into the area and actually may rediscover the downtown area."

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