

# Star-Telegram

## Financing for Southwest Parkway finally in place

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PLANO -- After nearly a half-century of planning, Southwest Parkway finally has its financing in place.

On Friday, North Texas Tollway Authority officials formally agreed to take over and jointly finance the proposed Fort Worth toll road, as well as Texas 161 east of Arlington. Both projects are considered essential alternatives to traffic-choked highways.

The 8-1 vote ended three years of efforts by Tarrant and Johnson county officials to find a builder for the toll road, which will run 28 miles from Interstate 30 near downtown Fort Worth to U.S. 67 in Cleburne. The road was originally planned in the 1960s as a nontoll state highway but had been repeatedly passed over for funding.

Although the tollway authority has now committed in writing to finance Southwest Parkway, several milestones must be reached before construction can begin -- including a federally required environmental update on the Johnson County portion of the road, known as the Chisholm Trail.

But officials expressed optimism that they can get the finances squared away and have the road under construction by early 2011 and open by late 2013.

"I'm convinced these projects are needed for our region," tollway board member Michael Nowels of Lewisville said. "I think we have an obligation to step up."

Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief said Southwest Parkway is a major part of the solution to the city's mobility challenges.

"After 48 years of sitting on a drafting table, the Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail project has, to some, become a bit of a myth -- and illusion," Moncrief said in a statement. "Now it looks like we're finally going to get started on an actual roadway."

For Texas 161, it really is a done deal.

Friday's vote was the final step in three years of negotiations by the tollway authority to build the road -- already under construction in Grand Prairie and Irving -- which the Texas Department of Transportation originally wanted to lease to a private toll road developer.

### Financial 'wrap'

Instead, the public tollway authority agreed to make a \$458 million payment to the state to take over the project. In return, the state will make available loans backed by state gas tax dollars to cover the tollway authority's expenses for Texas 161 and Southwest Parkway, in case toll revenue isn't enough.

Both projects will share revenue until both are paid off, tollway officials said. The financial "wrap" was considered crucial by regional planners, who didn't want the tollway authority to pick one project over the other.

Still, several tollway board members were reluctant supporters of the arrangement, saying the tollway authority, once flush with cash, can't add much more to its already burdensome \$7 billion debt load.

"We're having to cobble together financing plans for toll roads that are not feasible to build as toll roads," tollway Chairman Paul Wageman of Plano said. "We're responding to a funding crisis."

However, they noted, the alternative would be to give Dallas-Fort Worth motorists no new roads, since the Transportation Department does not have the gas-tax-supported cash flow to build everything it needs.

"I believe we are doing what we never should have done, which is become a primary provider of transportation rather than a supplemental provider," lamented tollway Vice Chairman Victor Vandergriff of Arlington.

He said he doubts that the agency will have the resources to build the next batch of regional toll roads, including Texas 170 near Alliance Airport and Texas 360 near Mansfield.

### Broader reach

But Friday's vote did ensure that the tollway authority will be a truly regional entity, with a project in Tarrant County in addition

to its home base in greater Dallas.

"From a regional perspective," Vandergriff said, "I think we're making the right choice."

The lone vote against the project was from Bill Moore of Plano, who criticized an eleventh-hour demand by the Transportation Department that the tollway authority pay a fee and interest for any funds borrowed using the state's gas tax as collateral after the 10th year of the deal.

On Wednesday, members of the Texas Transportation Commission voted to let the tollway authority take over Texas 161 and Southwest Parkway, but only if the tollway authority pays fees until the debt can be refinanced without the gas tax fund as collateral.

State Commissioner Ned Holmes of Houston said such fees are essential to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment for Dallas-Fort Worth. Holmes said any fees collected from the tollway authority would be sent back to North Texas' Regional Transportation Council, to be used on other projects.

Several tollway authority board members balked at that last-minute change, saying it is driving up the cost of the Texas 161 and Southwest Parkway projects.

But that stalemate ended Friday when members of the regional council said they would agree in writing that fee proceeds they receive from Austin would be immediately rebated to the tollway authority.

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