

*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

## EDITORIALS

# After decades, Fort Worth tollway plan is taking shape

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Quickly, name a year from 2004 through 2013 that has NOT been officially declared as the year Tarrant County residents would drive on the Southwest Parkway.

Answer: All of those years are on the list. So were others before that.

So if it hasn't happened yet, why should anyone believe it will happen anytime soon? The short answer is, although this project has struggled for more than 40 years, it has made steady and significant progress in the last decade.

It's been said too many times -- by people who earnestly believed it -- that Southwest Parkway is coming soon. Nobody knows what could go wrong next, but this is a good time for optimism.

Even ultra-steep price escalation has not stopped it. Pegged at \$158 million to \$178 million in 1997, the cost has reached \$1.8 billion today.

As it stands, the project has a looped and twisted financial structure that Texas Transportation Commission member Bill Meadows of Fort Worth says defines it even more than its planned aesthetic enhancements and engineering feats.

It's a safe bet that anything else that goes wrong will come from that complicated finance plan. Still, Southwest Parkway advocates have surmounted every problem through the years:

Born in the mid-1960s as a freeway to be built with tax money, the proposal steadily climbed to the top of the state's transportation priority list. But when money still didn't materialize, in 1994 it was designated to be built as a toll road.

A proposed segment looping from Interstate 30 around the north side of downtown to link with Airport Freeway faded after city objections, leaving the 8.2-mile stretch from I-30 to Altamesa Boulevard and another running 19 miles to U.S. 67 in Cleburne.

People who live near the proposed route, notably those just southwest of downtown and those in the Overton Woods neighborhood near Bellaire Drive, raised complaints. After prolonged negotiations, the City Council approved a final route in 2003 and a year later agreed to an attractive but costly list of amenities, including extensive landscaping and architectural features and a 50 mph speed limit.

The city has been responsible for purchasing most of the right of way, the state for buying land for and constructing major interchanges and the North Texas Tollway Authority for building the road and collecting tolls. The city purchased the largest tract, 143 acres on the Edwards Ranch, in 2005 for \$29 million.

Union Pacific blocked progress for years, objecting to a bridge over its huge Davidson switching yard south of Vickery Boulevard. UP finally agreed last year to a \$95 million bridge and yard alterations. Money designated for regional transportation projects will pay the city's \$48 million share, and the NTTA will pay the rest.

Federal economic stimulus grants totaling \$144 million will pay for intersections at Interstate 20 and in Cleburne. A 10-ramp I-20/Southwest Parkway/Southwest Boulevard monster mixmaster has been temporarily downsized to six ramps. Part of the route to Cleburne has been shrunk to two lanes.

The financial plan intertwines money and promises of money from the city, the NTTA, the Regional Transportation Council and the state -- and even from the Texas 161 tollway in Dallas County. Seen in its most favorable light, it balances expenses with anticipated revenue, but just barely.

It still could take another two years to finalize the financial plan and start building Southwest Parkway's traffic lanes. Don't bet the farm on it yet, but there's reason to be optimistic.

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