

# Up next, how to tackle I-35E

Officials look to public and private sectors for highway expansion

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By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

Steps have been made toward Interstate 35E's eventual expansion, but there's still a lot of planning to be done before construction starts.

Senate Bill 1420, which passed during this year's state legislative session, authorized the use of public-private partnerships to fund the construction. Officials are now working on a plan for the best way to tackle the expansion project and deal with costs between the public and private sectors.

"Senate Bill 1420 gave us the tools to do what we have to do, and we are implementing those things now," said John Polster, transportation consultant for Denton County.

The expansion is planned between Interstate 635 in Dallas and U.S. Highway 380 in Denton. Currently, I-35E consists of four to six regular lanes and four frontage lanes. The proposed expansion project would include eight regular lanes, four tolled HOV lanes and four to six frontage lanes.

Polster said Texas Department of Transportation officials requested information from construction and engineering firms to determine how those firms would proceed with the expansion project.

"Before we assume how they see it done, we ask them," Polster said. "We take the information and use that to form our next steps."

Eleven companies responded, including companies from the U.S., Spain, Israel, Canada and Australia.

He said one-on-one interviews had been conducted with representatives from those companies, which produced many different ideas.

Some advocated that the private company pay for the entire project and be paid back from toll revenue; some were pushing for the state to pay for the construction. Others pushed a hybrid model where the state and the company would share the cost. One called for a "public-public" partnership that would include investments from TxDOT and various other state agencies.

The Senate bill also requires the forming of a committee that will decide how to proceed with the expansion. Polster said the committee will include representatives from TxDOT, the Regional Transportation Council and the North Texas Tollway Authority, plus any entities with a financial stake in the project, including Denton County.

County Judge Mary Horn said the expansion project is progressing as expected. The project received its environmental clearance last week for the northern section from FM2181 to U.S. Highway 380.

County officials plan to meet with the NTTA board of directors this month to seek its approval for TxDOT to solicit bids for the construction.

NTTA has the rights to the project, but has indicated it would yield that right to TxDOT, Horn said.

“That’s not to say we would not use them to collect tolls, but we would use someone else for construction,” Horn said.

She said there’s \$600,000 to start the project, but it’s far too early to know how to pay for the project.

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