

Planners say Texas 360 extension is on course

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BY GORDON DICKSON Fort Worth Star-Telegram

ARLINGTON -- Some officials are getting antsy about what appears to be a lack of progress on extending Texas 360 from south Arlington into Mansfield, but regional planners insist that the toll road project is on course.

"I've been given so many different dates, it's hard for me to speculate anymore," Mansfield Mayor David Cook said. "We don't have a preference for who builds it. We just want it built."

Mobility advocates consider the Texas 360 corridor a transportation backbone for North Texas. It's a major north-south route connecting Grapevine, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and Arlington's entertainment district.

But the main lanes end near East Sublett Road/Camp Wisdom Road. From there to the south, motorists must use about 10 miles of frontage roads to reach U.S. 287 in Mansfield.

The North Texas Tollway Authority agreed in 2007 to build the Texas 360 main lanes as a toll road. The agreement was part of the "five in five" program, a commitment by the authority to deliver Texas 360 and four other projects to the region within five years.

But five years later, the addition of Texas 360 main lanes still lacks funding.

The main holdup is that the project is still undergoing a federally required environmental review, said Victor Vandergriff of Arlington, a tollway authority board member.

"The NTTA has spent millions of dollars pushing it forward, and regional planners in that area -- Arlington, Mansfield, Kennedale -- are all supportive of moving that forward," Vandergriff said. "There hasn't been any lost time on it, but it is ready to go."

Some officials question whether the tollway authority has the financial resources to build the Texas 360 extension. During the past five years, it has paid the region \$3.2 billion to take over the Sam Rayburn Tollway and also agreed to take over the President George Bush Turnpike western extension (formerly Texas 161) in Irving and Grand Prairie and build the \$1.6 billion Chisholm Trail Parkway toll road from Fort Worth to Cleburne.

Texas Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said it may be time to consider hiring a private developer for the job.

Although state law gives the authority dibs on building the Texas 360 extension as part of its tollway system, it also allows the authority to hire an outside developer.

The Texas Department of Transportation has used outside developers for state highway projects, such as the North Tarrant Express and LBJ Managed Lanes.

This week, the department reached a tentative deal with a developer to rebuild and expand Interstate 35W from I-30 near downtown Fort Worth to U.S. 287 near Alliance Airport.

The I-35W project could begin in mid-2013 and be completed by mid-2018.

The tollway authority could do something similar under state law -- bring in an outside developer willing to invest upfront money in the Texas 360 extension in return for some of the future toll revenue. The Texas 360 extension will likely require multiple funding sources rather than relying simply on tolls paid through the tollway system, Meadows told an audience during a recent mobility forum at the University of Texas at Arlington.

"It still is an NTTA project. NTTA declared it one of its 'five in five' projects, and I'm not sure they've delivered it in five [years] but they've made a valiant effort," Meadows said.

He was a tollway authority board member before joining the state Transportation Commission in 2008, and he approved the authority's "five in five" strategy while there.

"The question is going to be, Can that project be delivered by NTTA? Does NTTA have the capacity to take that project? It really depends upon what model they use," Meadows said.

"I anticipate they're going to have to have several partners come together to deliver that. I think they're going to need significant financial assistance to get it across the goal line."

Meadows said he believes that if the Texas 360 extension is environmentally cleared by spring, it could be built by 2017.

Vandergriff said the tollway authority hasn't ruled out using an outside developer -- known as a comprehensive development agreement -- but also hasn't ruled out building it in the more traditional fashion, using bond debt backed by tolls.

"I expect this to be cleared up here in the next couple of months," he said.