

Texans are sick of toll lanes and the backlash is delaying Fort Worth's I-35W project

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January 23, 2018 11:34 AM

Updated January 24, 2018 12:59 PM

FORT WORTH

It's no secret Texans are sick of toll roads.

But that anti-toll sentiment now threatens to delay the final piece of Interstate 35W expansion in Fort Worth.

Members of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, a group of Fort Worth-area business and political leaders that for more than a decade has pushed for I-35W improvements, are calling for supporters to write Gov. Greg Abbott and other elected leaders and [demand a quick resolution of the dispute](#).

The area in question is about a 6-mile stretch of I-35W from U.S. 287 (the "Decatur Cutoff") to Eagle Parkway, which is near the main entrance to Alliance Airport. The project calls for existing lanes to be rebuilt and toll express lanes added at a total estimated cost of \$762 million.

The current expansion of I-35W from U.S. 287 south to downtown Fort Worth, which has been underway for several years, would not be affected. That project, which also includes a combination of toll and toll-free lanes, is scheduled for completion later this year.

More than two-thirds of the \$762 million (\$520.9 million) would come in the form of federally backed loans and private activity bonds. A deadline is looming to secure those loan funds or risk losing them, said Vic Suhm, coalition executive director.

The state's private partner, North Tarrant Express Mobility Partners, plans to build the project with those loans and private equity, as well as a relatively small contribution of \$18 million in state tax dollars, which typically include gasoline and diesel taxes and annual vehicle registration fees.

"I think it's all private funding and some federal loans," Suhm said. "The problem is, those loans are going to expire fairly soon."

But even though almost no public money is directly involved, the loans and bonds can't be secured without the Texas Department of Transportation's signature. And that agency, which is under pressure from state legislators not to build more toll roads, has not acted.

Supporters of the I-35W expansion say the agreement to rebuild this last piece of I-35W goes back to 2009, before anti-toll sentiment reached its current levels in the state.

At the state transportation department's Fort Worth district office, officials are deferring to the wishes of the Texas Transportation Commission, which is based in Austin and sets the department's budget and political direction. The commission is sticking to the notion that state funds should not be used for projects with toll lanes.

“Staff have been working with NTE Mobility Partners on the final contract for this next phase of work on I-35W. During this process, state leadership has provided some initial guidance to the Texas Transportation Commission on the use of tolling,” transportation department spokeswoman Jodi Hodges said in an email. “For this particular project, we will look to further policy direction from our Commission along with future conversations with local partners to help guide us on some possible ways to move forward with the project.”

But locally, government agencies, businesses and several hundred residents are speaking in favor of finishing the I-35W project. On Tuesday morning, the Tarrant County Commissioners Court [approved a resolution](#) asking the state to speed up the completion of the I-35W project, which is often cited on government documents as I-35W Segment 3C.

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