

Report clears way for toll road

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FORT WORTH — A much-discussed toll road designed to relieve traffic congestion in southwest Fort Worth wouldn't cause serious, permanent environmental damage, according to a federal report released Friday.

The long-awaited, 500-page, federal study examined the environmental

PARKWAY Construction on a proposed toll road would generate temporary air pollution and noise but have no major lasting environmental effects, a new federal study finds.

impact of the proposed Southwest Parkway and clears the way for eventual construction of the toll road, also known as Texas 121T.

"We do not foresee a significant impact," said Jodi Hodges, a spokeswoman for the local office of the Texas Department of Transportation. "But you have to think, if there had been a cause for concern about a major environmental impact, the proposal most likely wouldn't have reached this point."

The report notes that construction

of the toll road would cause temporary air pollution, noise and some soil erosion but no permanent damage.

Some local environmentalists question the report's conclusions, saying the study doesn't account for development that would occur along a future toll road.

"I just can't think there's no big
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Proposed Southwest Parkway, Texas 121



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effect on the environment," said Earl Burnam, air quality coordinator for the Greater Fort Worth Sierra Club. "It will worsen air quality. They're not looking at all the development that will go beyond the construction of the highway itself. "The money for this could be spent a lot better and more effectively if they would use it for public transportation," he said. "That would eliminate a lot of the traffic jams and congestion."

The release of the study, which has been under way since 1998, means that local, state and federal officials can now move forward with the proposed roadway.

At least two public meetings on the study are scheduled for next month, and the City Council could choose a specific route for the toll road by mid-February.

"This is a major milestone," said Randy Bowers, the transportation department's project manager.

Plans for the parkway, which have been discussed for more than 30 years, call for 8.2 miles of toll road in the city and an additional 15.1 miles to extend the four-lane road as a controlled-access freeway to Cleburne.

Report

Copies of the report are available at sites throughout the city, including: any library branch; the Texas Department of Transportation, 2501 Southwest Loop 820; and the engineering department at City Hall, 1000 Throckmorton St.

The report can be purchased from the state transportation department for \$107 for paper copies or \$10 for a CD-ROM.

Copies are available online for no cost at www.SH-121T.org.

For years, traffic in southwest Fort Worth has become more congested, to the point where some motorists avoid the area during rush hour.

The federal report shows that the situation could get worse.

The toll road "is a vital component of a much larger transportation system serving the Dallas-Fort Worth area," the report says. "If constructed, it would offer a faster, safer and more efficient transportation system serving the southwest portion of Fort Worth and Tarrant County and the northern part of Johnson County."

"It would become an essential part of the overall transportation network in Tarrant County."

The report concludes that the roadway would have no lasting negative environmen-

tal effect.

"Short-term effects, which in most cases are not considered to be permanent effects, include localized disruptions, higher noise levels, increased air pollution and the rerouting of traffic during the construction period," according to the report.

Other findings:

- The road would improve highway safety and cut down on pedestrian/ vehicle accidents. It would boost fire protection and emergency services, because of the "ease of travel," and would improve access to schools, hospitals, churches and other public facilities.

- It would not degrade the air quality. Mobile emissions are predicted to decrease because of the state's clean-air efforts and the use of more efficient vehicles.

- Although noise would increase with the construction of the toll road, it would fade once completed and "any extended disruption of normal activities is not expected."

- Construction would temporarily affect the use of hiking and biking trails along the Clear Fork of the Trinity River.

"My initial reaction is that this is very good," said Michael Weaver, project manager with Austin-based Prime Strategies, the consultant

group handling the project for the city. "For trying to build a freeway through an urban area, it's pretty clean."

"Things that traditionally become deal breakers — air quality problems, wiping out cemeteries, destroying buildings — it doesn't have any of those," he said. "It has taken a long time to get to this point."

City officials must still find a way to fund the toll road, which could cost more than \$300 million. Fort Worth could pay up to \$100 million if officials can't find ways to scale back.

A final route still must be chosen and a final environmental impact statement is expected about three to four months after next month's public hearings, Bowers said.

The road will be built through a partnership, with the North Texas Tollway Authority designing and building the main lanes along Texas 121, the transportation department paying for the interchanges and rights of way for those interchanges, and the city bearing the costs of rights of way for the 8.2 miles in Fort Worth.

The city's portion also includes any additional costs, such as relocating utilities,

adding enhancements such as landscaping or public art and reconstructing or building city streets as needed over the toll road.

The plan calls for construction of the road to begin in mid-2004 and be finished by mid-2006. Tolls of \$1 likely would be collected to repay bonds issued to cover construction costs, landscaping and maintenance.

The tollway portion would stretch from Summit Avenue at Interstate 30 near downtown to Altamesa Boulevard/Dirks Road in southwest Fort Worth.

The draft report, published Friday in the Federal Register, was put together by the state and federal transportation departments, the Federal Highway Administration, the tollway authority, the North Central Texas Council of Governments and consultants.

"Overall, the project will help people get to their destinations in an efficient way," Bowers said. "We won't have people stuck in traffic causing unnecessary emissions any more. People will be able to get to their destination in a reasonable amount of time."

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