

# Officials considering adding tolls to parts of Texas 360, Texas 161

Posted Thursday, Oct. 14, 2010

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Motorists now using portions of Texas 360 in south Arlington and Texas 161 in west Irving for free could be asked to pay tolls under a proposal being considered by local transportation officials.

The Regional Transportation Council, the Metroplex's federally recognized planning body, is weighing whether to ask the state for permission to convert short stretches into toll roads to raise money to speed up repairs.

Right now, doing so would violate the RTC's policies and state law.

The agency wants to establish toll roads on Texas 360 from Interstate 20 south to East Sublett Road and Texas 161 from Texas 183 to the President George Bush Turnpike.

Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, raised the issue at the RTC's meeting Thursday while cautioning RTC members that it may not be a good time to increase the use of toll roads.

In the upcoming legislative session, lawmakers will already be dealing with issues such as a \$21.5 billion budget shortfall, immigration and redistricting, he said. It may be better to wait until the 2013 session.

"Would the public fully understand, or would we lose the support we have now in ... converting free lanes into toll lanes?" Morris said. "As a staff person, I am very nervous. ... It could be like the Trans-Texas Corridor, where once the opposition started, you couldn't have a conversation about it."

## Bumpy ride

Dallas Councilman Ron Natinsky said the idea merits further discussion.

"At some point, I think we need to test the idea with some legislators and see if it's going to be an idea that will float," Natinsky said. "I think we need to do our homework on that."

On Texas 161, the North Texas Tollway Authority could save the state \$74 million to rebuild three miles of the four-lane freeway and expand it to six lanes in exchange for the right to convert the road into part of the Bush Turnpike, said Allen Clemson, tollway authority executive director.

That stretch of Texas 161 -- the only nontoll portion of the road -- is bumpy and a stark contrast from the smooth pavement on the adjacent turnpike.

The nontoll portion of the roadway needs to be rebuilt by 2019, officials said.

## Unsettling idea

If the RTC decides not to convert Texas 161 to a toll road, it's unclear how the Texas Department of Transportation plans to come up with the \$74 million pledged to the project.

On Texas 360, the need is further down the road, maybe 10 years or longer.

But the tollway authority is also studying converting a two-mile portion of the nontoll road from I-20 to East Sublett Road, including the intersection at Southeast Green Oaks Boulevard.

That area is where the Texas 360 main lanes end. South of there motorists can take only frontage roads.

While the prospect of tolls may be unsettling for residents of south Arlington and Mansfield, the tollway authority is already responsible for planning a southern extension of Texas 360 from East Sublett Road to U.S. 287. So the debate at the RTC on Thursday was really over whether to extend the tollway authority's reach an extra two miles to the north.

And the larger and potentially precedent-setting question is whether the RTC should make an exception to its long-standing policy against converting freeways into toll roads.