

It's time to complete I-35W. A deal is a deal.

February 05, 2018 02:40 PM

Updated February 05, 2018 09:41 PM

In the past few years public officials who dare include new toll lanes in highway projects have become targets for extermination, not only by voters but by some high-flying elected leaders.

That's not how it was in 2009, however, when the Texas Legislature passed an agreement that approved managed toll lanes for the final leg of the North Tarrant Expressway. Now, however, completion of the 6-mile section of the highway expansion is indefinitely delayed, and that could jeopardize financing.

[We agree with transportation planners who are urging local stakeholders to pry loose approval from top leaders.](#) This stretch is in one of the fastest-growing areas in the country and [the I-35 corridor already is considered one of the most congested corridors in the state.](#) The need for the I-35W expansion won't go away.

It appears this final segment is being indefinitely delayed by a [Texas Transportation Commission](#) bowing to anti-toll road pressure from Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

At a cost of \$762 million, the project calls for existing lanes to be rebuilt and toll express lanes to be added. About \$521 million would come from federally backed loans and private activity bonds taken out by the private developers, [NTE Mobility Partners](#). NTE would provide another \$223 million. Texas would kick in \$18 million, money that could come from gasoline taxes, motor vehicle registration fees or proceeds from state issued-bonds or the state's rainy day fund.

The Texas Department of Transportation was going to use this formula—which has already provided more than \$4 billion into the entire NTE project—to pay for this last section of highway. Then Abbott and Patrick objected.

[Patrick said adding the toll lanes runs counter to lawmakers efforts to reduce the state's reliance on toll roads.](#) He said voters approved Proposition 7 in 2015 to pump billions into new infrastructure, but not into paid lanes. To continue along this path opposes their will, Patrick said.

Abbott, who appoints all five of the commissioners overseeing TxDOT, also spoke out against using tax dollars for more toll lanes. A spokeswoman for Abbott told the Texas Tribune that he has expressed “their desire to not include new toll roads” in the long-term roadway plan.

Local transportation leaders, including the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, are countering with a letter-writing campaign asking Abbott, Patrick and others to resolve their differences and allow I-35W to go forward as previously approved.

The numbers show this is a good investment. The state will only be putting up a fraction of the cost — \$18 million of \$762 million. If the project isn't paid for this way, TxDOT's and taxpayers will be asked to foot more of the bill.

Our region took this approach to paying for roads in 2009 because the need outstripped available dollars. Those conditions aren't likely to change.

Motorists may grumble about paying tolls on managed lanes, but they ultimately support this approach by putting the pedal to the metal and whizzing through the toll gates across our region. The non-tolled lanes are still there for those who prefer to wait longer in traffic.

It takes decades to plan, finance and build major roadways. What lawmakers decided in 2009 after public discussion should be honored. A good deal then is still a good deal today.