

Traffic relief finally comes to this awful stretch of highway — at a price

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Fort Worth - Motorists on Interstate 35W in north Fort Worth just got some sorely needed traffic relief, although if they want to take advantage of it they will have to pay a price.

Four miles of new toll lanes opened Thursday on I-35W, between Loop 820 and Northside Drive. With the opening of the two new toll lanes in each direction, it is now possible to take toll lanes nearly 10 miles from Northside Drive to Heritage Trace Parkway in far north Fort Worth, providing motorists with a toll option around one of Texas' most congested freeways.

Existing toll-free lanes are also being rebuilt, and ramps are being modernized.

Also, officials with North Tarrant Express Mobility Partners, the team of companies overseeing the \$1.4 billion makeover of the I-35W corridor, said they expect to be finished with the entire I-35W project by Sept. 30, and possibly weeks earlier. The main missing piece of the I-35W project is now from Northside Drive south to downtown Fort Worth and Interstate 30. Construction in that area, marked by a dizzying array of detours along Texas 121, U.S. 287, I-35W and I-30, has caused long delays for motorists trying to get in and out of the city center for more than two years.

About 10 a.m. Thursday, just before the four-mile stretch of new toll lanes — also known as TEXpress lanes — opened to the public, a caravan of elected officials and other dignitaries took a drive on the new toll lanes, stopping on a flyover ramp near the south end of the 820/35W interchange to take photographs and speak about the project.

Tarrant County Commissioner Glen Whitley used the opportunity to praise the contractors for getting the toll lanes completed about six months ahead of schedule, and he called for state leaders to sign the documents needed to extend the I-35W improvements north from Heritage Trace Parkway to Eagle Parkway near Alliance Airport. That piece of I-35W development has stalled because Gov. Greg Abbott and other state leaders have clamped down on the Texas Department of Transportation's participation in any future toll projects.

"We're wasting time," Whitley said. "We really believe I-35W is the backbone that runs from Mexico to Canada, and this is the area where it has been congested."

Already, businesses are taking advantage of the improved access to I-35W as well as Loop 820, said Brian Randolph, president off Mercantile Partners, which oversees huge swaths of industrial and office park developments around the 820/35W interchange and near Meacham Boulevard.

Just in the past four years since work on Loop 820 was complete, an additional 4 million square feet of commercial space worth potentially up to \$500 million has opened up in the Mercantile area, and improved access to the properties is the main reason for the business interest, Randolph said.