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Pressure mounts over funding of Southwest Parkway

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Dissatisfied with the tedious progress of the sweeping Southwest Parkway, Burleson officials are seeking an accounting of how the North Texas Tollway Authority plans to pay for the \$2 billion toll road project.

On Thursday, Burleson Mayor Ken Shetter sent a letter to tollway Executive Director Allen Clemson asking for a copy of the traffic and revenue study for the proposed toll road from downtown Fort Worth to Cleburne. Burleson officials said the study is a public document.

Shetter, a longtime transportation advocate, met last month in Cleburne with state Sen. Kip Averitt, R-Waco, and other Johnson County and state officials. He said he got the impression that the tollway authority wanted those involved to work together to solve the funding shortfall.

Shetter said that he isn't opposed to sitting down with the tollway authority and with the Texas Department of Transportation to find a workable solution but that more information is needed.

"I feel very strongly that the revenue study is public information, and I think we should have the facts," he said. "If we don't, how can we have meaningful conversations?"

Funding gap

Shetter said he has not heard back from the tollway authority. But the agency told the *Star-Telegram* last week that the study is not public information until it is approved by the board.

Last week, tollway officials announced that the traffic and revenue study had identified a \$1 billion funding gap because the project's estimated cost has soared to \$2 billion, only about half of which has been identified as being available.

The project includes building the Southwest Parkway from Interstate 30 near downtown Fort Worth to Dirks Road, and eventually to Farm Road 1187. The tollway would continue as the Chisholm Trail to U.S. 67 in Cleburne.

Work is scheduled to begin in 2010, if the tollway authority and the department can agree on a finance plan.

The funding gap is expected to be discussed Thursday during a Regional Transportation Council meeting in Arlington. An update on the use of regional toll road revenue and federal stimulus funding for Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail and other projects is on the agenda.

Tollway officials have asked the state Transportation Department for financial help, possibly including a state infrastructure bank loan of up to \$500 million, and use of state gas tax funds to guarantee tollway authority loans.

Tollway Vice Chairman Victor Vandergriff of Arlington has said the state should help the tollway authority get the project off the ground. He noted that this year about \$211 million in state gas-tax-supported funds were pulled off the project and used for other Tarrant County road work.

However, Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, told Regional Transportation Council members in an e-mail late last week that different categories of funding were swapped between accounts for Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail and other projects, but without a net reduction.

"The Regional Transportation Council made a \$250 million commitment of funding for the Southwest Parkway and is still honoring that commitment," Morris wrote. "Commitments have actually grown, not decreased."

Financial stake

Shetter said he consulted with other Johnson County officials before writing to the tollway authority. Copies were sent to mayors Mike Moncrief of Fort Worth, Ted Reynolds of Cleburne and Merle Breitenstein of Joshua.

Burleson has committed financially and politically to the project, Shetter said, explaining that the city spent about \$200,000 on right of way. Burleson also went through political battles when it annexed land along the route. The furor over the annexation led to a recall election in 2003.

Chisholm Trail is also needed in Cleburne, as the city doesn't have opportunities for more growth unless the road is built, he said.

Shetter said the council of governments projects that in 20 years, Johnson County will have two to three times as many people as jobs, meaning that commuters will travel north to Fort Worth and Dallas.

There are also no immediate plans to expand Interstate 35W from Johnson County to downtown Fort Worth.

Shetter said the lack of progress is affecting other projects, including the I-35W Coalition's efforts to widen the interstate north of downtown Fort Worth.

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Ken Shetter,
Burleson mayor

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