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Makeover of Grapevine freeways is expected to be completed by 2014, state official says

BY GORDON DICKSON

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FORT WORTH — Drivers can expect to pay 64 cents for a four-mile trip on the toll express lanes tentatively scheduled to open on Grapevine freeways in 2014.

The initial rate of 16 cents per mile will allow motorists to pay their way out of congestion along the Texas 114/121 corridor by jumping on the special lanes, where tolls will be collected electronically, at the Grapevine-Southlake border and riding through Grapevine to Irving. There will be only one toll-lane entrance in each direction — so toll customers won't mingle with local traffic — and the toll rate will increase during heavy congestion to keep the paying customers at about 50 mph.

The toll rate will likely increase to an average of 24 cents a mile by 2029 — or 96 cents for the four-mile trip.

Maribel Chavez, the Texas Department of Transportation Fort Worth district engineer, provided the update about the toll plans to about two dozen people Tuesday night at a public hearing.

The toll details were among the highlights of the otherwise low-key hearing on the DFW Connector project, which includes a makeover of Texas 114/121 and other freeways. The work is expected to start early next year and be completed by 2014, Chavez said.

The estimated toll rates were determined by traffic modeling and ongoing negotiations with the private developer designing and building the project, she said.

The lone audience speaker was Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes, who strongly supports the DFW Connector project.

Fickes remembered calling the freeway mess the "Grapevine Funnel" as Southlake mayor in the 1990s.

"We've changed the name of the project, but we've still got the same problems," Fickes said, thanking Chavez for pushing the project forward. "I want to urge you to work with affected property owners. There are a number of businesses on the right of way that are going to be significantly affected, and we want to take care of them as best we can. I know there's a process for that. I can't wait to see it start."

Today, the highways have two to four lanes in each direction. The plan calls for expanding Texas 114/121 to seven westbound lanes, six eastbound lanes, four toll express lanes and six frontage road lanes.

In all, the 14.4-mile project is expected to cost \$1.5 billion, but portions will be postponed for lack of money.

Available funding includes \$667 million from gasoline taxes and \$250 million in federal stimulus funds. That's enough to at least build all the new lanes on Texas 114/121 and rebuild interchanges such as Texas 114/121 at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport's International Parkway, and at Texas 121 and William D. Tate Avenue, Chavez said.

In March, a team of private developers known as NorthGate Constructors — led by Kiewit Texas Construction L.P. of Fort Worth — was awarded a contract to design and build the DFW Connector. But the arrangement doesn't tie the Transportation Department into a long-term arrangement with the team unless a clause is exercised giving NorthGate responsibility for highway maintenance.

The project includes rebuilding parts of Texas 114, 121, 360 and 26, as well as slivers of Farm Roads 1709 and 2499 and Interstate 635.

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Gary Fickes,
Tarrant County commissioner

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