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State may finally be on the verge of expanding Airport Freeway

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Sixteen years have passed since the Texas Department of Transportation told dozens of Hurst residents that their homes were in the way of progress and would be removed for Airport Freeway expansion.

The proposed reconstruction of the six-lane highway, also known as Texas 121/183, has been delayed time and again by funding shortages. Many residents have been left in limbo — unable to rest easy in their homes knowing that they would eventually be torn down but also unable to sell the property and move on with their lives.

But the state agency may finally be on the verge of fulfilling its promise to homeowners in Hurst — and commuters across Tarrant County — and get the project under way.

The proposed expansion of the busiest freeway in Tarrant County, which also cuts through Bedford, Euless and North Richland Hills, will be discussed during a hearing tonight in Euless. Residents are invited to attend and submit comments.

"The hearing will give interested citizens an opportunity to provide input in this highly anticipated highway project," agency spokesman Michael Peters said. "Ultimately, it will include the three main lanes and three toll lanes in each direction, improved frontage roads and added auxiliary lanes."

The possibility of building noise walls in neighborhoods will also be discussed.

Environmental study

The hearing is part of a federally required environmental study, which is expected to be completed by fall. Then the Transportation Department can begin buying all the necessary rights of way and moving utility lines.

After more than a decade of funding delays, a breakthrough came this year when the department awarded the project to NTE Mobility Partners, a private developer. That group, which is headed by the U.S. arm of Spain-based Cintra, agreed to build the first \$2 billion of the estimated \$5 billion project.

Cintra plans to pay for its part of the project by combining \$570 million in gas-tax revenue from the state with \$300 million in equity and \$1.1 billion in debt — and recoup that investment by collecting tolls on the new lanes for 52 years.

First phase

The first phase of the project includes expansion of 11 miles of Airport Freeway, and Northeast Loop 820 in Haltom City and North Richland Hills. The plan is to add two toll lanes in each direction initially and a third lane by 2030.

NTE will also create a master plan for expanding other area highways by 2030, possibly including Interstate 35W in north Tarrant County by 2018.

About 83 acres from nearby property owners are needed for the project, state officials say, including 0.7 acre of the L.D. Bell High School campus. In all, land from 128 homes, 27 businesses and a church is needed.

In Hurst, 60 homeowners have already qualified for medical hardships, and their land has been purchased, Peters said. But under state law, the Transportation Department cannot buy real estate from property owners without a medical hardship until after the federal environmental study period is concluded.

The plan calls for existing lanes on Texas 121/183 to remain free, but the new lanes will have tolls. Beginning in 2015, it could cost up to \$6.50 to drive the full length of the toll lanes.

If you go A public hearing will brief residents about the proposed expansion of Texas 121/183 in Northeast Tarrant County.

6:30 tonight

First Baptist Church, Euless Campus West, 1000 Airport Freeway

A brief open house will be followed by a presentation and an opportunity for residents to submit oral or written comments. Read more at www.txdot.gov.

Source: Texas Department of Transportation