

This one can't get away: Dallas' huge stake in the Trans-Texas Corridor

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Traffic: Can't live with it; can't live without it.

That's the dilemma Dallas leaders face as they survey the proposed Trans-Texas Corridor, Gov. Rick Perry's plan for a new network of highways crisscrossing the state to be built as toll roads by private companies. Dallas' interstates are choked with traffic, but if Mr. Perry diverts that traffic – especially the long-haul commercial trucks – beyond the city limits, he will siphon off the city's economic lifeblood.

No wonder city leaders are squawking over preliminary maps that show the new corridor being located as far as 50 miles from Dallas' doorstep. We love commerce and hate congestion, but to some degree they're inseparable. That's a dynamic we've wrestled with for at least a century.

Dallas owes its existence as a city to two railroads. In 1870, the village founded by John Neely Bryan was just one of a dozen North Texas settlements competing to become railroad towns. Railroad officials chose Dallas because the city's leaders threw liberal amounts of land and cash their way and because of some fancy footwork (rival towns would say trickery) by Dallas' lawmakers in Austin.

One of the railroads, the Texas & Pacific, ran right through the heart of downtown along Pacific Avenue. The other, the Houston & Texas Central, ran along what is now Central Expressway. They made Dallas rich and they made it grow. But as the city grew, the railroads also became a nuisance and a hazard to other downtown traffic.

George Kessler's famous 1911 city plan for Dallas recommended removing the T&P's tracks from Pacific Avenue and establishing a central terminal near the Trinity River – the still-used Union Station. Within a few decades, neither of the original lines still operated; both railroads had established routes nearer to the periphery of the expanding city.

The metropolis we live in would be unrecognizable to the people of that day, but its underlying economic foundation hasn't changed. According to a Harvard analysis, transportation, logistics and related industries still generate by far the largest share of the region's wages.

The primary route for NAFTA traffic hauling goods from Mexico to the northeastern United States and Canada runs through Dallas: north on Interstate 35, east on I-20, north on I-635 and then east on I-30. Goods imported through the port of Houston travel up I-45 to Dallas and join that procession.

Dallas is also fast becoming a major gateway for goods imported from China. Shipping containers travel by rail and truck from the port of Long Beach, Calif., to Dallas, where they become part of the flow up the NAFTA corridor to Detroit and points further north and east.

Regardless of what route the Trans-Texas Corridor takes, some of that vital river of commerce will eventually bypass Dallas. A new interstate, I-69, will run from Laredo through Houston and Texarkana to Detroit.

Dallas officials already are scrambling for strategies to shore up Dallas' role as a major freight-handler. Their ideas are bold and intriguing, with the potential to not only maintain the status quo but bring robust economic growth to the city's struggling southern sector. Among their ideas:

To create an "inland port of pre-clearance." This would be a one-stop shop in Dallas where cargo containers traveling by rail or truck would be weighed, inspected and X-rayed a single time on their journey. Once inspected, each container would be physically and electronically sealed, to be X-rayed again at its final destination. The port would collect fees and tolls on behalf of every jurisdiction along the route and transmit them automatically to the appropriate states. The process would save haulers precious time spent now on repeated inspections and would allow states to cut their inspection budgets.

To provide storage for the port of Houston. The nation's second busiest port is running out of space to stack the thousands of containers that can pile up waiting for their ships to reach port. Those containers could easily be stored in Dallas and dispatched by rail at the appropriate time for loading.

To join other cities in creating a "linear free-trade zone," where businesses meeting certain criteria could get a predetermined set of tax incentives.

To build a cargo airport strategically located for seamless transfers to rail and trucks. If those strategies are to work – to grow the city's commercial tax base – the Trans-Texas Corridor must be located inside or very near the Dallas city limits. State officials say they understand that, but they're making no promises about the route, in part because federal law prevents them from naming a preferred route before they complete extensive public hearings. The next hearing in Dallas is Feb. 7.

Ric Williamson, appointed by Mr. Perry to head the Texas Transportation Commission, recently tried to reassure Sandy Greyson, who heads the Dallas City Council's transportation committee. He said that, even though right-of-way is cheaper in remote rural areas, the new toll road would be unlikely to attract enough traffic if it were more than 10 miles from the existing interstates. Ten miles is a lot better than 50 miles, but not nearly as close as what the council wants: three to five miles.

The state is moving this project forward at breakneck speed, so the next 12 months will be critical. If you care about Dallas' economic future, attend the Feb. 7 hearing or contact Mr. Perry or Mr. Williamson. Your children's livelihoods may depend upon it.

Have your say:

Public hearing: Monday, Feb. 7, from 5 to 8 p.m., Grauwylor Community Center, 7780 Harry Hines Blvd.

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