

Commission favors loop around D-FW

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AUSTIN - A proposed toll road that would encircle Dallas-Fort Worth has a new nickname: the Doughnut.

Texas Transportation Commission members passed out Krispy Kreme doughnuts Thursday to symbolize their support for the outer loop, which would be built in segments from 2011 to 2030 as part of the Trans-Texas Corridor.

They also celebrated the commission's approval Thursday of a new road-building partnership among Metroplex cities and counties, the North Texas Tollway Authority and the state. The partnership would also work with any companies wishing to build private toll roads in the area.

"We are committed to the Doughnut," commission Chairman Ric Williamson declared, raising a pastry to about 30 visiting North Texans.

Dozens of boxes of doughnuts were brought into the meeting and passed to speakers and the audience. They were courtesy of Gov. Rick Perry, Williamson said.

Perry came out in support of the Metroplex's outer loop plan earlier this month. Several people referred to its doughnut shape, and the nickname stuck like wet sugar.

Metroplex leaders asked that Trans-Texas be built close to Metroplex roads, rather than going east of Dallas and bypassing the metro area.

Part of the loop would fit snugly around Tarrant County, following Johnson County's Farm Road 917 to the south and the Parker County line to the west.

The federal environmental review on the proposed route is expected to be completed in the next few years.

North Texas' support for Trans-Texas stood out during 54 hearings statewide this summer. Most of the nearly 3,000 Texans who spoke or submitted comments about the project were against it.

Planning for the 210-mile loop must start now, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "We think this right of way must be acquired as soon as possible," Morris said, adding that the longer the wait, the more expensive and developed the land will be.

To show support for local control of roads, commissioners stepped down from their dais and held Thursday's meeting at a conference table, sitting with Regional Transportation Council members.

Commissioners approved a plan that allows Metroplex leaders to solve road problems with a consensus of agencies -- including the RTC, the tollway authority and state officials.

As part of the new power-sharing deal, the Plano-based tollway authority has agreed to build several projects, including Southwest Parkway in Fort Worth, and an extension of Texas 121 to Cleburne.

Meanwhile, the Texas Department of Transportation has agreed to seek private-sector development agreements on projects such as Grapevine Funnel toll lanes, Texas 161 in Grand Prairie and Texas 121 in Collin County.

Future work will be decided by the RTC, whose members include the Transportation Department and the tollway authority.

One interesting example may be Texas 121 south of Fort Worth, which state officials say could generate \$625 million for future road projects if built as a private toll road.

The tollway authority has dibs on that project, but under the new deal, it must specify how much excess revenue will be paid to the RTC.