



Tollway funding would be tough, official says

By JIMMY ISAAC
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A proposed tollway around Longview would have a difficult time getting the funding necessary for construction and could cost up to \$65 million just for the right of way if built now, a Texas Department of Transportation official said Thursday.

The news came during a meeting of a regional transportation subcommittee that completed a viability analysis of the East Texas Hourglass, a proposed connection of tolled outer loops around Tyler and Longview that would cross four counties. The analysis will be presented in September to the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority.

The Hourglass would have an estimated price tag of almost \$1 billion, according to preliminary estimates included in the analysis. That amount does not include Loop 49 in south and west Smith County.

Officially, the analysis reports that the tollway around Longview would have a 10 percent bonding capacity. Bonding capacity measures a tollway's potential financial viability. The analysis is based on traffic patterns, retail or residential development and other factors.

Lending institutions use the percentage to determine whether a potential tollway would generate enough revenue to pay the construction bonds.

A 100 percent viable tollway means that a road could be built right away, said Authority Chairman Jeff Austin. A lending institution would pay for all of the maintenance and operation of a toll road with a 100 percent bonding capacity because the bonds would be almost a certainty to be paid through driver-paid tolls, he said.

Austin, who did not attend Thursday's meeting, said the bonding capacity for the Hourglass could improve in future years as north and east Longview experience more development and population growth.

Drivers on the Hourglass, like those on Tyler's Loop 49, would need a toll tag, which can be purchased at designated locations. Sensors along the road would scan the tag as vehicles passed.

The mobility authority anticipates to pay for some of the Hourglass construction with revenue generated from Loop 49, which opened its first five-mile stretch — from U.S. 69 to Texas 155 — this week. The loop will become a tollway in November.

"As that gets up and running and picks up more traffic," Austin said, "that's going to help the Hourglass and its entirety as it extends over into Gregg County and Harrison (County). When we complete the pieces, each segment

is going to help the other segments, as well."

Randy Redmond, TxDOT Tyler District transportation planning and development director, said right-of-way acquisition has come at a price tag of just less than \$1 million per mile for other East Texas highway projects.

"Although \$65 million is a lot of money," he said, "the right of way is a drop in the bucket compared to what the cost of building the highway will be."

The proposed route would connect with Tyler's Loop 49 just north of Whitehouse and continue northeast, crossing into Gregg County and passing between Gladewater and Clarksville City. It would cross into Upshur County and curve east around East Mountain before crossing back into Gregg County and then into Harrison County.

The western Gregg County route has a 14 percent bond capacity according to consultants, Redmond said. At an estimated \$235.8 million, it is the most expensive portion of the Hourglass outside Smith County because it navigates through much of the East Texas Oil Field and the Sabine River bottomlands.

The northern route from East Mountain to Judson, as well as a spur south to Interstate 20 in western Harrison County, would have a 0 percent bond capacity because of already existing roads, such as George Richey Road and East Loop 281. Those roads are free and would compete with the proposed tollway.

Harrison County Judge Wayne McWhorter suggested moving the Hourglass's eastern leg from between Longview and Hallsville to east of Hallsville to better attract Marshall-Longview commuters and avoid slicing more heavily-populated areas.

"When I see this toll road, I'm not going to stop there," the judge said of the route west of Hallsville. "It's only another two or three minutes to Loop 281.

"I view all of this setting the stage for all of this — Smith County, Gregg County and part of Harrison County — becoming a metroplex."

Redmond said the original concept of the Hourglass did not have an eastern leg to the Longview outer loop, and said that portion was the least viable of all the concepts that TxDOT has studied.

Paul Jaap, TxDOT Longview area engineer, said a complete outer loop — with eastern and western legs — could serve as a possible relief route if wrecks occur on Interstate 20.

Subcommittee Chairman Dave Spurrier suggested calling the entire Hourglass Loop 49 so future discussions would be about the continuation of a highway project rather than a new project.

Redmond said that could be confusing to drivers, but engineering consultant Mike Burns said the historic "line of demarcation" between Tyler and Longview must be erased to progress as a unified region.

"We really need to start to get past that if we want to look at this region as a metroplex," he said.

