

State, region leaders get on toll road roll

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After months of stalemates, state and regional leaders sat at the same table last week and officially hashed out many of their differences over the Trans-Texas Corridor and other planned toll roads.

And in a moment of lighthearted symbolism, they shared a few doughnuts. I'll explain later.

The Texas Transportation Commission, at its regular meeting Thursday in Austin, approved an agreement that lays out the future of at least six toll projects in North Texas.

The agreement specifies which agency - - the Transportation Department or the North Texas Tollway Authority -- will build these toll roads: along State Highways 121 and 161, the Bush Turnpike eastern extension, the Lewisville Lake Toll Bridge and the Southwest Parkway in Fort Worth.

The tollway authority approved the agreement this month.

It stipulates that the state will build and control toll roads along Highways 121 and 161, and the tollway authority will build and operate the others.

"This is a new day in North Texas," said transportation commission chairman Ric Williamson.

"We had a little bad spot here in the past year, but that's behind us," Dallas County Commissioner Maurine Dickey told the transportation commission.

Most of all, the agreement should prevent unnecessary delays on projects and help motorists keep moving.

While the agencies were haggling over the rights to future toll revenue, some of the toll projects were in danger of being delayed.

In addition, the transportation commission discussed the potential creation of a "doughnut," or new highway loop, around the edges of North Texas.

Regional leaders for months have pushed for a future Loop 9, as the doughnut plan is known locally.

That loop, according to a letter issued by Gov. Rick Perry last week, should be part of the study determining the Trans-Texas Corridor route through the region. When someone mentioned the "doughnut" plan, a bell rang and Texas Department of Transportation staffers marched into the commission meeting room and distributed dozens of doughnuts to those in attendance.

"Governor Perry said, 'If you're going to give them a doughnut, you need to give everybody a doughnut,'" Mr. Williamson said.

The decision to include the loop option in the Trans-Texas Corridor study doesn't mean that other possible routes have been eliminated, state officials emphasize. For example, a wide swath of land through Ellis County that is part of the original route study is still being reviewed.

Even with the toll road and Trans-Texas Corridor study agreement, debate over the future of North Texas transportation projects will continue.

State and regional leaders began hashing out their differences Thursday over other modes of transportation. State officials have been quietly pushing for an all-encompassing regional mobility authority that could handle toll roads, mass transit, freight rail line relocations and other projects.

North Texas leaders got the transportation commission to agree to let regional officials work on those projects rather than create a new agency.

"I am personally persuaded that this is a path one can go down and be successful at," Mr. Williamson said.

Tony Hartzel can be reached at thartzel@dallasnews.com and at P.O. Box 655237, Dallas, Texas 75265.