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290-Hempstead Corridor: Will it Proceed as Planned?



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by: Wendy Siegle

If you're tired of sitting in traffic on 290 the Northwest Freeway, you're probably wondering if the congestion will ever let up. The good news is that plans for the expansion and reconstruction of one of Houston's most clogged corridors are getting close to federal approval; the bad news is that a crucial part of the plan is in limbo. From the KUHF NewsLab, Wendy Siegle has more.

"The 290 corridor is typically a mess. I use it every day.... It's a parking lot most days."

A disgruntled commuter, like Gerald Lowe here, can go to My290.com where the Texas Department of Transportation, TxDOT, clearly states its plan to improve gridlock on the 290-Hempstead corridor. The designs for the three-part plan are posted on the website and have also been promoted through public hearings and in the federal environmental impact statement.

In a nutshell, the plan is this: upgrading the 10/610/290 interchange; widening 290; and expanding Hempstead into a toll road which would also have lanes for carpoolers and transit users. If finalized, TxDOT would be in charge of the 290 upgrade and the interchange, and Harris County of the new Hempstead Tollway, which runs parallel to 290. But there's a problem: in this marriage of agencies, bride-to-be Harris County isn't sure she's ready to commit.

"For more than four years, the people sitting in traffic on 290 have been told by TxDOT that Harris County is going to build the managed lanes first. And we need people to understand that the County is not committed to doing that."

Robin Holzer of the Citizens Transportation Coalition says the agencies haven't informed the public that the Hempstead Tollway may not be part of the final plan. We need Harris County to get real clear that solving congestion where the people are means doing Hempstead first, and doing it well.

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett acknowledges that the county is uncertain it will go forward with the Hempstead side of the project.

"We have to make sure that the design on the Hempstead Tollway is such that it's toll viable."

That's because the Harris County Toll Road Authority only funds projects that pay for themselves. Otherwise, taxpayers may have to pick up any additional costs. Emmett indicates that another roadway might go first if it makes better economic sense.

"We have other projects that would be toll viable and if those come ahead of Hempstead then that's what we'll have to do, and hopefully some of them would be relievers to the congestion on 290, segment E of the Grand Parkway for example."

Holzer agrees that the county needs to ensure a toll road's economic feasibility before sending the workers out. But

she says with the Grand Parkway, the county is prioritizing a rural area over a highly populated one.

"The question I have is why is Harris County working to figure that out for Grand Parkway, out in the unincorporated parts of the county, when they should be trying to figure that out for the Hempstead corridor, to get some relief for 290 commuters."

Regardless, TxDOT says it's sending in the final environmental statement to the Federal Highway Administration, or FHWA, this summer. If approved, they'll have a green light to begin construction.

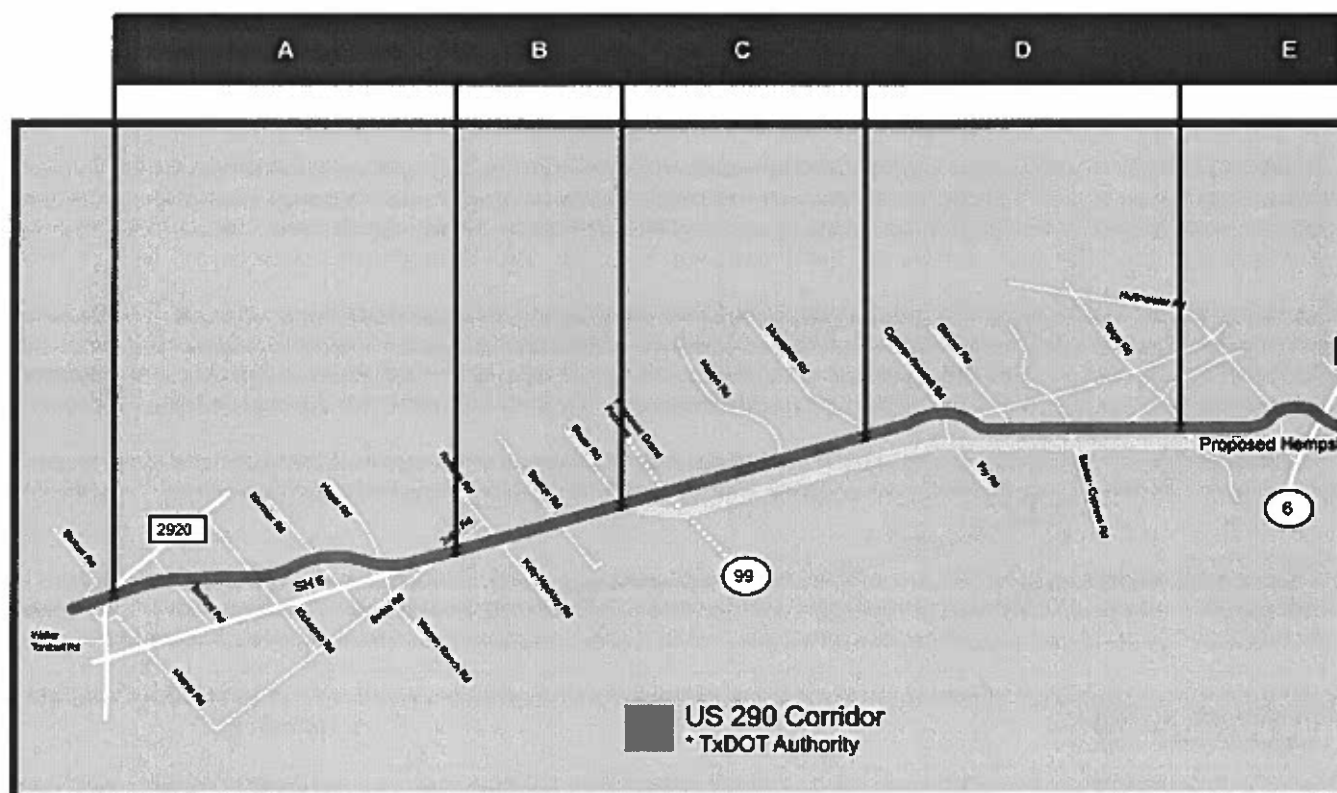
Not speaking on this project specifically, the FHWA says that, generally, final documents shouldn't be submitted unless the plan is rock solid. If the project is given the go ahead, TxDOT will start to construct the 10/610/290 interchange which should help reduce congestion. Part of the update includes direct fly over lanes, so cars traveling inbound on 290 for example can go directly to I-10 without having to get on 610 first.

Anikka Ayala-Rogers from the 290 Program Team explains the design on a map:

"Now that traffic's gonna have its own way to get straight to I-10. It pulls them out of the equation."

The entire project will cost roughly 4.7 billion dollars, with a 'b'. Right now, there's less than \$315 million in the kitty, and that's going to build about half of the interchange. The interchange project must be released for construction bid by May 2011, or else the Texas Transportation Commission could decide to send the money elsewhere.

From the KUHf NewsLab, I'm Wendy Siegle.



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