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FW transportation plans on track, officials say

By A. Lee Graham

Reporter

From ongoing bridge reconstruction to commuter rail consideration, Fort Worth explores familiar roads – and ones less taken – as it enters a new year.

Asked to name the city's top transportation issues, challenges or developments in the last year, leading transportation officials mentioned many.

"The construction of Tower 55 improvements, construction of the Chisholm Trail Parkway, working to secure funding for sections 3A and 3B of the North Tarrant Express," said Michael Morris, director of transportation with the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

In September, Fort Worth secured \$104 million for rebuilding the Tower 55 train intersection and several rail crossings near downtown. And in November, the Fort Worth City Council received a project update on the Chisholm Trail Parkway, which promises swift passage between Interstate 30 near downtown Fort Worth and U.S. 67 in Cleburne. Primary construction began in December on the 27.6-mile, \$1.6 billion project, which is expected to open in mid-2014.

Another hotly anticipated project promises added traffic lanes and other improvements to Texas 121-183 and Northeast Loop 820 in north and eastern Tarrant County. Segments 3A and 3B of the \$2.5 billion North Tarrant Express project are expected to yield improvements on Interstate 35-West from north of Interstate 30 to south of Loop 820 and from north of Loop 820 to U.S. 81/87,(287?) respectively.

Dick Ruddell has firsthand insight into other transportation projects. As president and executive director of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, or the T, Ruddell shares Morris' praise for Tower 55 improvements. He credits local cooperation for pushing through such projects on his own list of top transportation issues in 2011.

Ruddell cites "the success our city, region and public-private partnerships achieved by working together to secure federal funding for Tower 55; continuing to work as a region on moving the North Tarrant Express forward; putting the Spur (signal, priority, urban route) buses in service on East Lancaster as the start of an enhanced bus corridor; and applying for a federal grant for TEX Rail," as key to the area's recent transportation success.

The priority of rail

TEX Rail – and commuter rail in general – is one of District 6 City Councilman Jungus Jordan's top four transportation priorities for 2012.

"First and foremost, our top priority is making improvements to I-35W," said Jordan, who is chairman of the North Central Texas Regional Transportation Council.

Rounding out his priorities are speeding up the implementation of commuter rail, executing previously approved street reconstruction projects and addressing transportation infrastructure funding.

Mobility is the primary tool in what Jordan called Fort Worth's "tool box."

"Our continued viability and quality of life are dependent on ensuring we are funding the infrastructure improvements that have made Fort Worth a critical transportation hub for local, national and international commerce," Jordan said.

Both Ruddell and Morris pointed to the area's freeway system and roads, as well as a strong mass transit system, as strengths, while Jordan named transportation in general.

"If you follow the evolution of transportation through history, you will find that Fort Worth has been the leader and innovator of virtually every advancement of transportation technology," said Jordan, pointing to cowboys and cattle drives, railroad development, automobiles and aviation.

Equally bullish on Fort Worth are Ruddell and Morris.

"Fort Worth enjoys a great legacy of working together to provide our community's transportation needs," Ruddell said. "We have a solid network of freeways and roads easy to get around during uncongested time, plus the Trinity Railway Express connection between Fort Worth and Dallas."

Morris also described the area's "modern freeway system, a gridded thoroughfare street system" and "a maturing transit system" as strengths.

But the area could do better, both men agreed.

The congestion issue

Asked to name weaknesses as Fort Worth faces the new year, Ruddell echoed a familiar refrain: congestion.

"Mobility has become increasingly difficult during congested rush periods," Ruddell said. "As we continue our rapid growth, our region must be able to provide a dependable network of additional multi-modal transportation options."

Growth has created its own challenges, Morris said.

"A weakness would be that growth is outpacing the ability to find revenue to construct transportation improvements," Morris said.

Jordan redefined the issue as "challenges" rather than weaknesses. He acknowledged difficulties with mobility and air quality.

"We are in non-attainment of air quality standards because we experience mobility gridlock," Jordan said. "We have identified the problem and have been working hard as a community over the last five or six years playing catch-up."

Asked to name new transportation projects or developments on the horizon, all three men listed several.

"Several things come to mind, such as the potential for high-speed rail from Fort Worth to Houston, the potential for higher-speed rail from Fort Worth to Oklahoma City and also from Fort Worth to Austin-San Antonio," Morris said.

Also possible, Morris said, is special-event passenger rail service from downtown Fort Worth to Alliance-Texas Motor Speedway.

Ruddell named projects already under way as well as those in the pipeline. He pointed to improvements to the Spur bus corridor on East Lancaster Avenue that are expected to be complete in the coming year. Those improvements will include real-time schedule information, spacious lighted bus shelters and bus stops with more detailed route information.

"Also in the works is the implementation of real-time schedule information on the Trinity Railway Express," Ruddell said.

Jordan pointed to the Chisholm Trail Parkway and several projects affected by mobility such as West Seventh Street development, Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and infrastructure awaiting construction in several parts of town.

"Mobility is driving growth," Jordan said.

As for the top transportation issues facing Fort Worth in 2012, Morris named planning and ongoing redevelopment, while Ruddell named specific projects.

"Major issues in 2012 include getting federal approval for the engineering pieces of TEX Rail, completing the North Tarrant Express ... addressing the multi-modal needs that will help resolve the challenges of I-35 congestion, and securing federal funding at a level that will allow us to address multi-modal transportation requirements of Tarrant County's explosive growth," Ruddell said.

Jordan named securing funding for I-35W improvements, bringing all approved and funded transportation projects to the construction phase, advancing commuter rail and finalizing the regional rail master plan, competing for and securing limited resources to solve mobility infrastructure issues, and building on the accomplishments of previous generations of Fort Worth residents.

"Fort Worth's continued success is dependent on our progress in addressing transportation," Jordan said.



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