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I-35 tolls may be likely for Northeast Tarrant County motorists

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Higher gas taxes, more managed lanes and a mammoth tax-increment financing zone could become reality if transportation officials pursue those options.

At issue is funding Interstate 35 improvements in the hope of unraveling the freeway gridlock that continues to frustrate northern Tarrant County motorists.

"Funding is very scarce," said Jeffrey Neal, program manager with the North Central Texas Council of Governments in Arlington, which hosted the first of six monthly meetings focused on improving I-35 between Interstate 20 and Oklahoma.

Those at the meeting discussed how to secure funding for the segment affecting Northeast Tarrant County while the remaining three I-35 segments stretching south to Mexico are vying for the same funding.

"Naturally, most of the improvements that go into construction come from gas taxes," said Neal, noting that recessionary woes have kept gas receipts lower in recent years. So officials are discussing not only additional gas taxes, but considering more managed traffic lanes and even a corridor-wide tax-increment financing district similar to the TIFs overseen by many individual cities.

"The idea is let's identify what the needs are," Neal said. "Let's identify what the projects are and how they can be prioritized. We're brainstorming at this point."

Neal emphasized that no options have been decided and discussion has only begun.

The goal is to hammer out a regional plan before collaborating with other segment leaders in drafting a comprehensive mobility plan for the entire I-35 as it stretches from Oklahoma to the Mexico border.

Several construction projects along I-35 are planned for Northeast Tarrant County, including adding two general purpose lanes in each direction and two to three tolled managed lanes between Loop 820 and U.S. Highway 81-287; adding one general purpose lane in each direction between U.S. 81-287 and State Highway 170; and, adding at least one general purpose lane and two tolled managed lanes in each direction from Loop 820 to Interstate 30.

But those projects most affecting Northeast Tarrant commuters lag behind plans to expand State Highway 183 from the 820 Northeast Interchange to State Highway 161.

"Those will go under construction first," said Neal, referring to construction plans about what's collectively known as the North Tarrant Express.

As it stands, I-35 expansion plans would occur at a later stage.

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