

Toll prices in Tarrant will vary based on traffic conditions

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Toll lanes are coming back to the Fort Worth area after more than a three-decade absence, with a few new and expensive wrinkles.

Tarrant County hasn't had a toll road, unless you count the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport entrance, since the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike was converted into a freeway (now Interstate 30) in 1977.

But more toll lanes are on the way in the western Metroplex within four years. Examples include the high-occupancy vehicle lanes under construction on I-30 in Arlington, Loop 820 in north Fort Worth, Haltom City and North Richland Hills and Texas 114/121 in Grapevine.

Tolls could go as high as 75 cents per mile when congestion is at its worst. That would be more than five times higher than the average 14.5 cents per mile that motorists currently pay on Dallas-area toll roads. It's a concept called value pricing, a way to limit traffic on the toll lanes and squeeze more revenue from motorists to pay for roads.

Supporters of value pricing, which also drops the price of tolls when traffic is light, say motorists will have a choice — stay on the crowded main lanes, or pay their way out.

"While there will be dynamic pricing, there will still be the general-purpose lanes, and in most places we're adding frontage roads," said Amanda Wilson, spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Where the tolls will be

Several years ago, the Regional Transportation Council set a ceiling of 75 cents per mile on variably priced toll lanes.

The lanes would operate electronically, without toll booths. Users could prepay with a TollTag, a windshield-mounted device that sensors read as a car travels on the road. Or, for cars without a TollTag, a camera system would take a picture of the license plate and mail the registered owner a bill.

Examples of projects:

In Arlington, high-occupancy vehicle lanes on Interstate 30 could be converted to toll-managed lanes by 2011. Toll rates haven't been set.

In 2004, the Federal Highway Administration selected I-30 as a "value pricing pilot project," which allowed it to get around a federal law banning new tolls on interstates. The transportation council was awarded \$472,000 in federal funds to plan and design the lanes from Arlington to Dallas. Single-occupant cars would pay the full toll, while carpoolers, motorcyclists and buses could use the lanes free or at a discount.

The lanes currently end at Baird Farm Road/Legends Way in Arlington but eventually would be extended to Oakland Boulevard in east Fort Worth.

In Northeast Tarrant County, a development team led by Spain-based Cintra plans to rebuild Loop 820 and Airport Freeway beginning next year. The work on the North Tarrant Express project is expected to take four years.

Existing lanes would remain free, but tolls on two managed lanes in each direction would range from \$1.20 to \$6.50 each way for a 13-mile trip — 9 to 50 cents per mile.

In Grapevine, developer NorthGate Constructors plans to rebuild seven highways collectively known as the DFW Connector — including two managed lanes in each direction on Texas 114/121. Exact rates haven't been disclosed, but drivers can expect to pay an average of 64 cents for a four-mile trip beginning in 2014, and 96 cents by 2029.

Southwest Parkway

In Fort Worth, the North Texas Tollway Authority is developing Southwest Parkway, a 28-mile toll road from downtown to Cleburne. The first eight miles, from I-30 to Dirks Road, are scheduled to be under construction next year.

Although Southwest Parkway won't be a variable-price road, it is expected that the toll rate will be 20 cents per mile by 2013, compared with the 16 cents motorists are expected to be charged on Dallas-area tollways. The tollway authority approved toll rates this year that will gradually increase through 2018, with Southwest Parkway always 4 cents higher than the standard rate.

Fort Worth officials agreed several years ago to the higher rate on Southwest Parkway to offset the cost of additional bridge work and landscaping, as well as an expected loss of revenue from keeping the speed limit no higher than 50 mph in central Fort Worth.

Elsewhere

Value-priced toll roads are increasingly being used by metro areas to limit traffic on toll roads and to generate new revenue sources for roads.

In Houston, local officials recently approved new tiers of pricing on the Katy Freeway toll lanes — \$1 each way during light traffic, and \$2 to \$4 during peak periods.

In Southern California, the 91 Express Lanes project has been around since 1995, allowing travelers on the Riverside Freeway to pay their way around traffic — up to \$9.90 for a 10-mile trip during the busiest hour of the week, 4 p.m. Thursdays.

The road has become such a part of the L.A. streetscape that gift cards are even sold on the official Web site, www.91expresslanes.com.

Can it be long before cards like that are stocking stuffers in Fort Worth?

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