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Southwest Parkway toll road gets stimulus money, but other Tarrant projects miss out

• Posted Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2010



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A proposal to make railroad crossings safer through Fort Worth's Tower 55 project and a plan to return streetcars to the city were snubbed Wednesday as federal officials doled out a last batch of recovery act transportation funding.

But a third project, the proposed Southwest Parkway toll road from Fort Worth to Cleburne, got a \$20 million boost Wednesday, the one-year anniversary of the stimulus program. A Dallas streetcar project received \$23 million.

Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez was among the top members of the Obama administration who fanned out across the nation Wednesday to defend the stimulus program and to tout how it has created jobs.

"We had to make some tough choices," Mendez said Wednesday while visiting Grapevine for the ribbon-cutting on the DFW Connector project. "We simply couldn't fund everything."

The U.S. Transportation Department also unveiled the final selection of projects that competed for \$1.5 billion in discretionary transportation investment, known as TIGER grants. In all, Texas received \$43 million in TIGER grants, fewer than 14 other states. California, for example, received \$130 million, local officials said.

It was the last step in a yearlong nationwide distribution of \$26.6 billion in recovery act funds, including \$2.25 billion for Texas.

Tower 55

Local officials were surprised that Tower 55, one of the busiest railroad intersections in the U.S., received no funding. Fort Worth requested about \$60.9 million from the U.S. Transportation Department to add rail lines to relieve congestion and to make safety improvements to railroad crossings near downtown Fort Worth.

At Tower 55, freight lines owned by Fort Worth-based BNSF and Omaha, Neb.-based Union Pacific Railroad intersect. Those companies pledged about \$30 million, raising the total amount available to \$93.7 million. Local officials thought the public-private partnership would improve Tower 55's chances of getting money.

"We're going to keep working on it. Tower 55 is a problem that is not going to go away," Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief said. The mayor, who talked with Vice President Joe Biden last year about Tower 55, believes there's a toxic mix of hazardous materials at Fort Worth's center -- an accident, or a terrorist attack, waiting to happen.

Streetcars

Several years of planning to bring streetcars back to Fort Worth's oldest neighborhoods also suffered a setback. The proposal was awarded no federal funds, although a similar proposal in Dallas received \$23 million.

Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley was angry, noting that Fort Worth and Dallas submitted a \$96 million joint application.

He blamed partisan politics, saying Dallas County is more Democratic and more politically aligned with the Obama administration.

"You happen to be in the reddest of counties," Whitley told about 500 people at the Northeast Tarrant County Transportation Summit. "The only county redder than Tarrant County in the U.S. is Orange County in California."