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Texas officials should quit fighting, build long-sought road

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Forty-five years is a long time to wait for anything. For the people of Tarrant and Johnson counties, the wait for construction to begin on what's now called the Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail project at times has seemed endless.

The first 30 years or so weren't so bad, but the past 15 have been excruciating.

Now, just when there is hope -- even as work has started on crucial intersections and a bridge over Union Pacific Railroad's huge Davidson yard -- it again looks as if plans could come crashing down.

The state Transportation Department and the North Texas Tollway Authority continued negotiations Tuesday on a plan for the NTTA to build the project. The five-member Texas Transportation Commission has scheduled a special meeting for 1 p.m. today to consider the product of those negotiations.

Contracts already binding on the NTTA have effectively set Sunday as a hard-and-fast deadline for reaching an agreement or heading back to the drawing board -- again.

The Southwest Parkway -- or a project similar to it linking growth areas of southwest Tarrant County with downtown -- has been a part of the area's transportation plan since 1965. The Chisholm Trail is the name given to an extension of that road to U.S. 67 in Cleburne, providing a north-south alternative for drivers on congested Interstate 35W.

Since 2000, the projects have been planned as a toll road. Traffic growth and progress on key elements like the Davidson overpass have collided with a lack of state funds for new roads.

With the NTTA finally poised to move forward, an affordability crisis hits. The NTTA fears that taking on another \$1 billion or more in debt for Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail would drive down ratings on its \$7 billion outstanding system debt and thus increase its costs. The agency wants the Transportation Commission to calm investors by entering into a "backstop" agreement whereby the state will step in with Highway Fund tax money if the project runs into trouble.

To strengthen the agreement and further isolate its current obligations, the NTTA would combine Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail with ongoing construction of the Texas 161 tollway in western Dallas County. The roads would form a separate "system," each supporting the other but neither drawing from or supporting the NTTA's other toll roads.

Transportation Commission members seem willing to go along. "I agree to it," Commissioner Ted Houghton of El Paso said during a Jan. 27 meeting. "I think it's good for the state of Texas and it's good for the region."

The agreement as constructed so far includes warning systems and additional financial backstops that would kick in before the state would be called on to help out, including a requirement that the NTTA raise toll rates if the project is not making enough money. Still, Commissioners Ned Holmes of Houston and Fred Underwood of Lubbock want more.

They want the NTTA to pay a fee, as much as \$12 million a year beginning in the 10th year of the new system's operation, for the continued state obligation. Their intent is to provide a strong incentive for the NTTA to refinance its debt and break the link with the state. The NTTA says the cost is prohibitive, and it's a deal breaker.

On Tuesday, negotiations came down to a question of whose heels are dug in the deepest. Not a good sign.

Both sides say they want Southwest Parkway/Chisholm Trail built. They should prove it. It's time to quit fighting and get it done. Don't disappoint Tarrant County again.