

MOPAC May Get Toll Lanes

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The move to expand MoPac Boulevard, which for several years has crawled along like 5 p.m. traffic on that overloaded highway, is about to enter the express lane.

"I would characterize it as a green-light go," Mike Heiligenstein, executive director of the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, said last week.

A federally required environmental study is in its final stages, with approval likely in the fall. The mobility authority, deputized by the Texas Department of Transportation to develop the project, has refined what it will do: add a fourth express toll lane on each side of MoPac (Loop 1) from just north of Lady Bird Lake to near Parmer Lane in far North Austin.

Alongside the road from West Sixth Street to north of RM 2222, at a cost of about \$20 million, would be 7.1 miles of tan-and-white, concrete sound walls 8 to 20 feet high. This would complete a quest of more than a decade by neighborhoods alongside MoPac for some relief from the noisy highway.

Construction on the \$250 million project should start by 2014, agency officials say. If so, those two express lanes would be open to traffic by 2016. A significant portion of the cost would cover the construction of new flyovers connecting the toll lanes and West Cesar Chavez Street. The new lanes from the river to RM 2222 would be created largely from the existing pavement by narrowing lanes slightly and reducing the width of shoulders. North of 2222, the project generally calls for adding pavement.

The toll lanes would be dynamic, meaning the tolls would fluctuate depending on the speed of the traffic — as the number of vehicles in the toll lanes increases and traffic slows, the tolls would rise to discourage more drivers from entering those lanes.

Partnership possible

The mobility authority is strongly considering using a public-private partnership to finance, build and perhaps even operate the toll lanes, a departure from the agency's stance just a few years ago when such long-term agreements fell into disfavor across the state. After soliciting interest from the toll road industry last year, the authority heard from 22 companies or consortiums that might want to bid on some sort of construction, financing or operations deal.

The agency, in building and expanding the 183-A tollway in Cedar Park and beginning construction on the Manor Expressway (a tollway along U.S. 290 East), has racked up about \$800 million in debt, which officials said could increase interest rates for further borrowing and thus nudge them toward an arrangement where the MoPac debt would fall on the private sector.

But officials emphasized that the project could still be done in a more traditional way, with the authority borrowing money on the bond market, then building and operating the toll lanes. A decision on which direction to go should be made this year or early next year.

Either way, the authority already has a commitment from TxDOT for \$67.5 million, more than a quarter of the project cost, and has applied for a \$72 million low-interest loan through a U.S. Department of

Transportation program. Bond financing, or the private sector, might have to supply less than half the project cost.

Tolls would be used to pay back that federal loan and other borrowed money, support annual operating costs and, the authority hopes, spin off profit that could be used to build other roads.

"We look at the (traffic and revenue) projections, and it looks really strong," Heiligenstein said. "Because on MoPac, there ain't an alternative, and it's just going to get more and more crowded. You're not dealing with some area that's not fully developed like 183-A or the Manor Expressway. You're dealing with a known quantity."

Either way, what ends up on the ground will be another new transportation animal for an area that has seen a menagerie of change in the past decade.

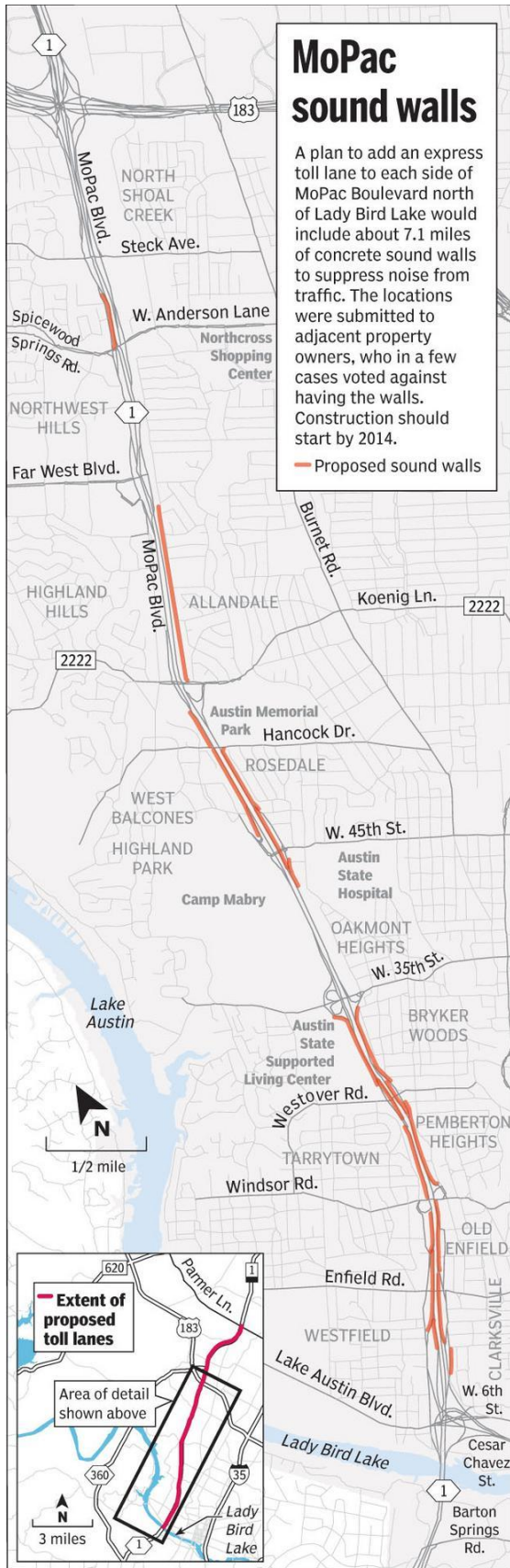
Changing rates

Many large U.S. metro areas over the past generation have installed on urban highways some version of high-occupancy vehicle lanes, known colloquially as car pool lanes, sometimes allowing solo drivers to use them as well if they pay a toll. Central Texas never joined that movement, and the MoPac express lanes won't change that.

Instead, the added northbound and southbound lanes would be open only to those willing to pay a toll, to transit buses, to registered van pools and to emergency vehicles.

But the real departure would be the nature of the tolls themselves, which would change minute by minute depending on the level of traffic in the lane. The point, Heiligenstein said, would be to keep the toll at a level calibrated to keep speeds in the lane at 50 mph or more.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin



Source: MoPac Improvement Project

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