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Move It!

Help on way for major highway interchange

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"Help 290!" has been a battle cry for some traffic-fighting commuters for years, but it wasn't until last week that the Texas Transportation Commission gave the nod to begin spending money on a massive reconstruction of the northwest artery. Or, at least, the first part of the first phase of a massive reconstruction.

The \$315 million allocation will allow work to begin on rebuilding the interchange of U.S. 290, Loop 610, and Interstate 10. The next 18 months will be spent acquiring rights-of-way and moving utilities. Drivers should start seeing construction in May 2011, said Delvin Dennis, the Houston District Engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation.

"Addressing the interchange was always considered one of the first things that had to happen," said Raquelle Lewis, a TxDOT spokeswoman. "It wouldn't do us any good to widen the capacity of 290, then dump them all in that interchange that's already widely congested."

The junction is ranked 13th on a list of the 100 most congested roadway segments in Texas. The work will include adding segregated, direct connector ramps to reduce the merging of cars exiting 290 onto the West Loop. For example, one ramp will take vehicles from 290 straight onto I-10 (eastbound or westbound) without making them first join the southbound main lanes of the West Loop.

"That merging worked when the traffic levels were lower," Dennis said.

The Transportation Commission vote Thursday authorized roughly \$2 billion in highway projects. The move was historically significant because it's the first time the agency is paying for projects using general obligation bonds. Previously, it used gasoline taxes and fees to pay for roadwork, or bonds backed by gasoline-tax revenues. But voters approved a proposition in 2007 that allows TxDOT to issue \$5 billion in bonds and pay them back from the state's general tax revenue.

The Gulf Freeway also was a winner in the commission's vote, grabbing \$127 million. A 5-mile section — between Kurland (near Beltway 8) and FM 2351 — will be widened from six main lanes to 10. And the HOV lane, which ends near Kurland, will extend the entire 5 miles to FM 2351.

Widening 290 is still in the future, planners hope. But funding has not been identified for those later phases, and TxDOT in general is facing a depletion of funds unless it finds more revenue soon. Planners are already telling me that raising the gasoline tax will be a big issue in the next legislative session.

Free ride for some vets

Disabled veterans will be able to drive for free on Harris County toll roads starting Dec. 18. To do so the veterans must have (or obtain) a "disabled veteran" license plate or a Purple Heart license plate. The handful of living Texas veterans awarded the Medal of Honor are also eligible. The "disabled veteran" plates are issued by the state (www.txdmv.gov). Eligible are veterans with a 50 percent service-connected disability, or a 40 percent disability because of the amputation of a lower limb.

The Legislature passed a bill allowing the free or discounted tolls during this year's session, and Harris County Commissioners enacted the free option for its toll system in late September.

A disabled veteran does not need an EZ Tag to drive toll-free, but the tag is required for access to some toll roads in the Harris County system. Call 281-875-3279 for more information.

'Airport Direct' bus

The Metropolitan Transit Authority recently announced its Twitter and Facebook debuts. Transit-using Twitterati can get real-time "tweets" about bus or light-rail changes and service interruptions.

Metro is also reminding holiday travelers that it offers an express bus service between downtown and Bush Intercontinental Airport's Terminal C. The "Airport Direct" bus costs \$15, one-way, and departs every 30 minutes. Buses leave for the airport from Pierce and Travis from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., and leave Terminal C from 6:10 a.m. to 8:40 p.m. More information is at www.ridemetro.org.

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So how much traveling will there be over Thanksgiving? Auto club AAA predicts that 38.4 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more for the holiday, a 1.4 percent increase from 2008.

Last November, the recession led to a sharp decline of 25 percent in Thanksgiving travel. So while travel is still down from previous years, there's a slight but real uptick from last year.

People may be traveling cheaper, however: AAA predicted that air travel will decrease by 6.7 percent.

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