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Trans Texas Corridor is dead, TxDOT says

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AUSTIN – After six years of bold plans, big talk and fierce pushback, the Texas Department of Transportation announced Tuesday that the Trans-Texas Corridor is dead, burying with it Gov. Rick Perry's visionary but controversial idea to string the state together with some 4,000 miles of highways, toll roads and rail lines.

"Make no mistake: The Trans-Texas Corridor as we have known it no longer exists," TxDOT executive director Amadeo Saenz said in a speech at an annual transportation conference. In its place will be a smaller, more deliberate plan that assesses individually each of the scores of projects once lumped together as part of the TTC.

The impact on Dallas-area projects should be minimal, TxDOT officials said. Local leaders had hoped that private firms selected to build the Trans-Texas Corridor would have eventually taken on two large projects in North Texas, including the Loop 9 toll road in southern Dallas and, much later, a 240-mile outer loop that planners have long envisioned for North Texas.

Neither of those projects has been awarded any state funding and will need to be built as toll roads, said Tim Nesbitt, Loop 9 project manager for TxDOT. But private firms have already expressed interest in Loop 9 and could well develop it as a standalone project even though the Trans-Texas Corridor is dead.

"I guess you could say Loop 9 is a desirable project in the eyes of the Cintra Zachry team," Nesbitt said, referring to one of two consortia previously selected to develop the early stages of the TTC. The project is still under environmental review and probably couldn't begin until 2012 under any circumstances, he noted.

But while the demise of the Trans-Texas Corridor won't stop road building in North Texas, its death serves as a milestone in the debate over the role that private toll roads, and tolls in general, should play in Texas – a debate that has raged since Perry unveiled his grand idea in 2002.

The Trans-Texas Corridor had always seemed more of a concept than an actual road plan. But at its core, the plan called for \$175 billion in spending over the next 50 years to run highways, rail lines and data lines from Oklahoma to Mexico, and from east to west in southern Texas. It was routinely billed as the biggest transportation project since President Dwight Eisenhower persuaded Congress to launch the interstate highway system in the 1950s.



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But beyond its huge scope, the most radical feature of the plan, and the part most cherished by Perry, was the proposal to let private companies foot huge portions of the bill. In return, they would earn the right to collect ever-increasing tolls from Texas drivers for decades to come.

Lawmakers initially went along with the idea, and in 2003 approved sweeping changes to Texas law to get the project started. But the idea, especially the way it would be financed, never gathered broad support.

And when TxDOT announced the TTC could take 1,200 feet of right-of-way through the length of Texas, rural landowners rebelled too, making the project one of the most controversial in modern Texas history. The issue dogged Perry throughout his 2006 re-election campaign and helped unite increasingly furious lawmakers, who in 2007 attempted to slow, but not kill, the project.

TxDOT, by its own admission, at first turned a deaf ear to the criticism. But in the past 18 months, it has spent hundreds of hours at dozens of public hearings trying to appease its critics. The crowds remained almost universally hostile.

The same lawmakers who were so angry in 2007 return to Austin next week for the 2009 session, and Tuesday's announcement by TxDOT chief Saenz showed that neither his agency nor the governor – whose staff was involved in the decision to kill the TTC – want to wage the same fight all over again.

"The Legislature has been clear; they want transformation," Saenz said. "That handwriting is on the wall, in big bold letters."

Perry sought to play down the significance of Saenz's announcement Tuesday. Talking to reporters from Iraq, where he was visiting soldiers, the governor said, "The fact of the matter is that we really don't care what name they attach to building infrastructure in the state of Texas. The key is that we have to go forward and build the infrastructure so that the state of Texas and our economy can continue to grow."

He noted, for instance, that the most important part of the plan to him, its reliance on private capital to help finance toll roads, remains a key priority and an approach he expects will be continued.

"We'll continue to use all the tools available to build the infrastructure," Perry said. "That's one of the reasons the Legislature agreed with us back through the previous legislative sessions that we needed to have more tools in our tool box, if you will, to build the needed infrastructure."

Whether lawmakers will go along with those plans is unclear. Faced with billions of dollars in unmet annual transportation needs, the state may embrace private toll roads as a last resort, but many

lawmakers remain upset over what they see as Perry's high-handedness in pushing the TTC.

Sen. Robert Nichols, a former TxDOT commissioner, said lawmakers will be looking closely at Tuesday's change in plans. "If it is just a name change, and nothing more, I don't think that is going to do much to appease lawmakers," said Nichols, R-Jacksonville.

Leaders of the grassroots groups that have opposed the project from its beginning celebrated the news. They said the announcement went well beyond a simple name change. David Stall, co-founder of the advocacy group Corridor Watch, said Tuesday the will of the people had prevailed.

"It was a bad project pushed in the face of legislative and public opposition and now there is a price to pay," Stall said. "The result is a major victory. The overarching statewide Trans-Texas Corridor that was a reality is no longer."

Staff writer Christy Hoppe in Austin contributed to this report.