

Officials Hope Federal Funds Speed Construction Of Loop 49

By ADAM RUSSELL, March 11, 2009
Staff Writer

Officials hope federal stimulus funds awarded last week for Loop 49 represents the "shot in the arm" needed to expedite connection to Interstate 20.

Last week, the Texas Transportation Commission, the Texas Department of Transportation's governing body, approved nearly \$38 million in federal economic stimulus funding for Segment 3A of Loop 49.

Segment 3A will connect to the existing segments of Loop 49 at Texas Highway 155, and proceed northwest to Texas Highway 31.

Segments 1 and 2, extending from Texas 155 to Farm-to-Market Road 756 (Paluxy Road) are open and Segment 5, between FM 756 and Texas Highway 110 in Whitehouse, is scheduled to let to construction in June of this year.

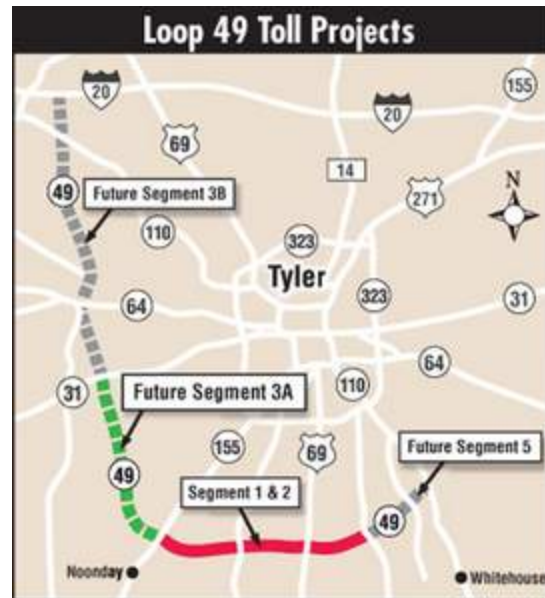
In July 2008, TxDOT spokesman Larry Krantz said the biggest problem Loop 49 faced was that "funding has dried up." Last week, another piece of the puzzle was awarded, and Krantz now says the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority may be in a position to expedite construction to reach Interstate 20.

NET RMA Chairman Jeff Austin III said the stimulus money, in addition to more than \$4 million in funding from Tyler's Metropolitan Planning Organization, will fill a funding gap that will "jumpstart" the connection to I-20.

"We're probably six to nine months away from issuing bonds to provide construction dollars to complete (Loop 49) up to I-20," he said. "There you have the real connection, the real solution."

Austin said the funding award and having segments 5 and 3A ready to go create the opportunity to turn \$42 million into \$150 million with bonding. He said the window of opportunity is there to fund Segment 3B (between Texas 31 and I-20), which will create construction jobs in the area and new infrastructure.

Project plans were prepared when the stimulus package designated money to



"shovel ready" projects for infrastructure construction. Loop 49 was near the top of the state's project list.

Mayor Barbara Bass has worked on the project since she was a member of the chamber of commerce and said reaching I-20 will be the major milestone, but each piece will reduce congestion and increase commerce and employment.

According to TxDOT, one job will be created for every \$30,000 dollars spent on the roughly \$57 million segment (3A) or about 1,900 jobs, she said.

This also places the NET RMA in a higher "cue" to receive bonds to move forward with construction of Segment 3B and connect Texas 110 to I-20.

"We are excited," Mayor Bass said. "It is a long-term project, and you can finally see the pieces lining up."

Sen. Kevin Eltife, R-Tyler, worked on the project as during his tenure as mayor and said many people can be proud of the potential escalation of the project.

"I know a lot of people are frustrated with Loop 49, but this has been in the works for a long time and it will only be effective when it reaches I-20," he said.

Eltife said the work will pay off when that happens.

"It's a regional project. So many other counties are impacted," said Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville. "It's huge (for the area). Every piece that is added makes it that more viable."

Segment 2 extends from U.S. Highway 69 east to FM 756 (Paluxy Road), a distance of approximately two miles. Construction on the segment was completed in late 2007. The roadway opened to traffic in January 2008, and tolling began in March 2008.

Segment 1 of Loop 49, between U.S. 69 and Texas 155, opened to traffic in August 2006.

Segment 5 of Loop 49, between FM 756 and Texas 110 in Whitehouse, is scheduled to start to construction in June.

Construction on Segment 3A is scheduled to contract in July, with construction to begin as early as September.

Preliminary estimates show that an average daily use of between 10,000 and 15,000 cars would support expanding Loop 49 from a two-lane to four-lane thoroughfare, Austin said. He said right now, the completed segments report about 4,500 uses on average.

Krantz said, when the second segment was opened, use automatically doubled and that with each additional segment, the potential for use increases.

Austin said that possibility is years away, but that everyone involved is looking toward that end.

He said the acceleration toward completion represents more than 40 years of work on behalf of many people in the community.

"It was a dream for a long time, and now it's becoming reality," he said. "A lot of people have put countless hours into it, and we are about to come to the finish line. I feel very optimistic about the project and providing better regional mobility for East Texas."