

Trans-Texas Corridor will do nothing for us

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The state has decided to build a Trans-Texas Corridor, a strip of concrete and metal four football fields wide linking Laredo to Oklahoma by highway, rail and energy conduit. The cost estimates I've seen range from \$142 billion to \$185 billion. Twelve possible routes are being considered. The one preferred by the Texas Department of Transportation, Alternative 5, would slice through the eastern part of Collin County.

On July 13, TxDOT held an open hearing at McKinney High School on the corridor's environmental impact. The forum, part of a series to be conducted across the state, gave citizens of Collin County a chance to express themselves about the project. With one or two exceptions, their reaction was overwhelmingly negative.

Hostile comments touched on a range of issues, including the impact of so much cement on the environment and how building the corridor will disrupt people's lives.

Their main focus, however, was on a single aspect of the project that is the key to its unsuitability: TxDOT plans to bring in a Spanish company called Cintra, have it build the highway at its expense and then run it, collecting tolls for 50 or more years.

Why do it this way? TxDOT officials gave me a number of reasons: It will make building the corridor much cheaper. TxDOT doesn't have the necessary personnel. The law does not allow the state to float bonds to finance the project.

All these reasons boil down to one thing: The governor and the Legislature are afraid to go to the people for the money.

The source of their fear isn't hard to find. The project's beneficiaries aren't in Texas. East Coast importers of goods from Asia hope to use Mexican ports for traffic the Panama Canal won't be able to handle. The corridor will be their truck and rail link north from Mexico. Wal-Mart will be its main customer. If Texans ever use it, they'll feel like tourists.

When I asked supporters what Texans get out of it, they could come up with only one argument: The road, they said, will reduce projected traffic on Interstate 35.

This might have impressed me, but I happen to know something about these privately built and managed toll roads. There are two in Panama, where I was born

and where I visit often since my parents live there, and one outside Toronto, where I go on business, run by the same bunch TxDOT wants to bring in. If there's one thing these toll roads don't do, it's relieve traffic on nearby highways.

Toronto's 407 is an electronic toll road that operates like the proposal for State Highway 121 in Collin County. There are no toll booths, and you pay with a transponder or get a surcharged bill mailed to you after your license plate is read. It is a beautiful road with hardly any traffic. Just south is a public highway, a 12- to 14-lane monster that is packed all the time. Why is it packed? Cintra keeps the tolls high to maximize profit, and people don't enjoy being played for suckers.

Exactly the same thing happens on "Corredor Norte" in Panama City, Panama. It's empty all day long, while traffic on alternate routes is bumper-to-bumper. We'll see it here when Highway 121 goes private: non-toll routes will be packed, Highway 121 empty.

If a case can be made that the corridor is vital to our state, let our representatives vote the money for it. Texans are going to pay one way or the other. Let's keep the money here for public use rather than send it to Spain for private profit.

Like most engineers, I'm enthralled by Pharaonic projects. They conjure intimations of immortality. But the pyramids didn't do much for ordinary tax-paying Egyptians. The Trans-Texas Corridor won't do much for Texans, either.