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North Freeway expansion back to drawing board DOT now looks to Hardy Toll Road for added capacity

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The Texas Department of Transportation, faced with opposition from residents to a planned expansion of the North Freeway, is rethinking its proposal and looking at the Hardy Toll Road to help provide added capacity.

"It could be half and half. It could be one or the other. We will look at both alternatives," said TxDOT district engineer Gary Trietsch. "That will probably take us at least a year. We'll see where we are a year from now."

The regional Transportation Policy Council, which screens proposals for federal road funding in the metro area, was scheduled to vote Friday on adding three new lanes to the freeway, which is also Interstate 45 North. But that vote was taken off the agenda.

Combined with the present reversible HOV lane, these would provide two new "managed" lanes in each direction for buses, high-occupancy vehicles and toll-paying motorists.

But after 500 residents and elected officials packed the Jefferson Davis High School auditorium Aug. 13 to protest any widening of the freeway between Woodland Heights and the Near Northside, the item was withdrawn.

When the item comes before the policy council again, probably in October, it will recommend new lanes on the freeway, the toll road or both, said Alan Clark, transportation planning manager for the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

Clark said possible ways to do that, besides widening one or both roads, include adding elevated lanes to the freeway as on Interstate 35 through Austin, or suspend lanes over frontage roads as on the North Central Expressway in Dallas.

TxDOT has said it will also consider putting the freeway in a tunnel, as proposed by Woodland Heights resident and transportation engineer Gonzalo Camacho, but Clark said the idea raises questions. "Where would you connect it? Once you were in it, where could you get off?"

TxDOT's estimate of the widening's cost, \$600 million, was ridiculed by opponents. Clark said \$1.5 billion is a more likely figure and could rise before the job is finished.

The county-operated Hardy Toll Road branches off from the freeway north of Spring and runs parallel to it about two miles to the east, ending at the North Loop. It is underused, but traffic is expected to pick up when a downtown extension is completed.

Harris County Public Infrastructure Executive Director Art Storey said it is not yet clear how the extension could be widened to handle extra traffic from the freeway.