

Traffic studies go in 2 directions on Dallas-area congestion



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Photos by Vernon Bryant/Staff Photographer

The Texas Transportation Institute says I-35E near downtown is the region's most clogged road.

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Ask Arlington drivers what the most traffic-clogged North Texas highway is and they're likely to answer State Highway 360. Ask Collin County residents and they're bound to say the Bush Turnpike interchange with the Dallas North Tollway.

Just don't expect a definitive answer about where to find the worst congestion in North Texas.

Myriad traffic congestion studies annually identify the nation's most frustratingly jammed highways. The reports' findings often conflict.

Yet they hold considerable sway in regional planning. Politicians and bureaucrats frequently point to the studies as they call for more highway building and transportation funding.

North Texas' most powerful transportation officials will meet Wednesday with Texas Transportation Commission member J. Bruce Bugg Jr. They'll discuss which Dallas-Fort Worth projects deserve the region's cut of more than \$1 billion in new state funds aimed at curbing congestion.

Gov. Greg Abbott directed the commission in September to use the funds to combat traffic in the state's largest urban areas. His source of concern: an annual Texas Transportation Institute study that ties together approximate values of a driver's time and the length of delays to estimate the economic impact of sitting in traffic.

But a growing chorus of transportation experts, urban planners and community activists in recent years have taken aim at such reports. They say the studies spur ineffective solutions (like more highway capacity) and ignore key development factors.

They also often say the reports are inherently flawed because conclusions rely on false assumptions about traffic jams.

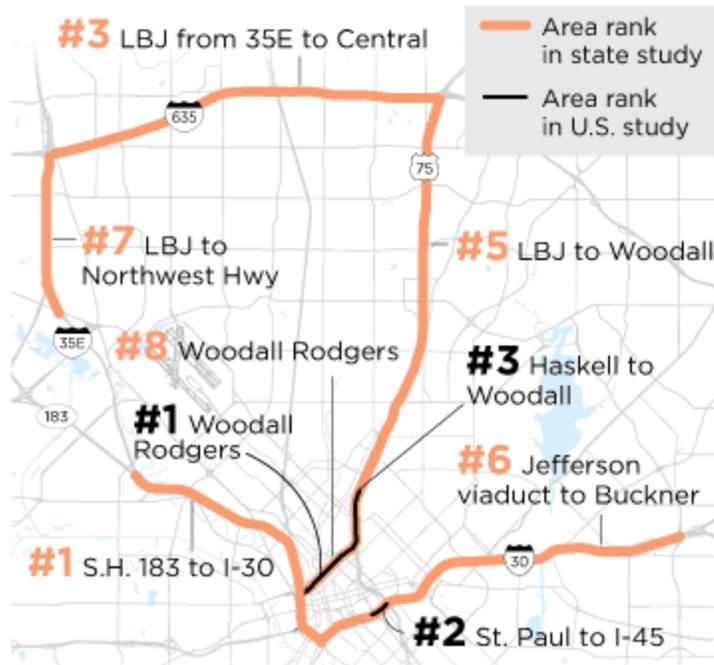
"The simple truth is there's really no solution for congestion," said Adie Tomer, a fellow at the Brookings Institution's metropolitan policy program.

Different conclusions

In October, the Texas Transportation Institute ranked the state's most congested corridors. It used traffic data estimates pegged to specific 15-minute intervals. It also linked segments of highways. It identified Interstate 35E near downtown as the region's most traffic-clogged thoroughfare.

The worst stretches

Two recent studies on highway congestion used different methods to look at traffic and came up with different findings about the worst corridors in North Texas. Here are some of the conclusions:



NOTE: Rankings are in comparison to other North Texas highways, and not necessarily the highway segment's rank among all state or national corridors studied.
SOURCES: Texas A&M Transportation Institute, American Highway Users Alliance

Michael Hogue/Staff Artist

Then in November, the American Highway Users Alliance released a national study that used data from GPS-enabled gadgets to zero in on specific chokepoints that cause traffic to back up. That report named Woodall Rodgers Freeway the region's worst spot.

No matter the methods, experts say a chief problem with congestion studies is that they typically rely on driver speed, not the distance they have to drive. They say that method masks how dramatically sprawl affects commutes.

“If you’ve got a compact development pattern and only have to commute 3 miles, even if you’re

commuting at 30 mph, it’s better than having to commute for 10 miles at 60 mph,” said Reid Ewing, director of the University of Utah’s Metropolitan Research Center.

In many cases, congestion studies are used as proof that more highway lanes or entirely new corridors need to be built. But that ignores the effects of induced demand — when additional highway miles only draw more drivers, which creates more congestion.

The Texas Transportation Institute study that named I-35E the worst corridor in North Texas called for a “balanced and diversified”

approach to congestion mitigation. That includes more public transit lines and larger bus fleets.

“It’s one thing when regional leaders use it to back an agenda for highway expansions they’re looking to support. But when you look at what TTI actually says in the report, they’re a little more balanced about it,” said Tony Dutzik, a senior policy analyst with the consumer rights organization Frontier Group.

Pinpointing backups

Monali Shah is the director of intelligent transportation at HERE Connected Driving, a company that helped prepare the American Highway Users data. He said that study’s precision can help officials find other ways to solve traffic because it pinpoints specific areas where backups begin.

“In some cases, capacity can be increased by upgrading design features, realigning tight curves or steep grades, improving visibility, repaving and restriping surfaces, reconfiguring merges and interchanges, or rebuilding common chokepoints like outdated bridges,” Shah said.

TxDOT is taking that approach with both I-35E and Woodall Rodgers.

With I-35E, the agency wants to spread out and separate some entrances and exits to prevent weaving that causes backups and accidents.

With Woodall Rodgers, TxDOT is focusing on the highway’s endpoints, which tie into other highways, as ways to unclog the corridor.

“There’s not a whole lot more you can do to widen it,” said TxDOT spokesman Tony Hartzel.

Other factors

Experts say that appraising transportation systems should also factor in land use, sprawl and residents' access to other forms of mobility.

“If we evaluate our cities based on whether we get people to where they need to go efficiently, reliably and comfortably, then the TTI study only gives you a small sliver of the answer to that question,” Dutzik said.

TxDOT is expected to release a study this month called CityMAP that looks at downtown highways not just from a traffic standpoint, but also from neighborhood connectivity and urban planning perspectives.

Tomer said that in many ways, traffic is the result of a robust economy because each car represents workers and consumers.

“Oddly enough, while it's difficult to deal with, it's actually a symptom of economic success,” Tomer said. “That's the deep irony.”

Tomer said public transportation, denser development and telecommuting aren't the only alternatives to highway construction. So, too, is a different frame of thought.

“Some of it is just people being ready to deal with congestion a little bit as the result of being in a big market,” he said.