

# A decade in transportation: new tollways and a long wait for rail

## Ben Wear: Getting There

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Think back, if you will, to those last moments of Dec. 31, 1999, when all of us were watching the clock and wondering if time, the lights, our computers, the electrical grid and who knows what else were about to just stop.

Didn't happen, of course. But think about what was about to happen: toll roads and passenger rail in Central Texas (well, passenger rail construction), Rick and Ric turning Texas transportation on its ear, Sal Costello and the Texas Toll Party. A new (bicycle and pedestrian) bridge over the Colorado River. The end of sub-\$2-a-gallon gasoline and the American debut of \$4-a-gallon gasoline. The advent of texting — and then rampant texting while driving — and now, a new City of Austin ordinance against that.

With the possible exception of the 1960s, when most of the interstate highway system was built, the past decade saw more change in Central Texas transportation than any period since horseback travel phased out a century ago. Most decades bring more of the same. This one brought a whole lot of new, including more miles of tollways than the combined length of Interstate 35 and MoPac Boulevard in Travis County.

### Pay as you go

There were Texas toll roads, but not in Central Texas. What Central Texas also lacked, despite years of talk about it, was an eastern bypass for increasingly clogged I-35, or any hope of getting a billion or two dollars to pay for one. Through a series of events too convoluted to repeat here, the Central Texas Turnpike Project was birthed to build that bypass — Texas 130 — along with connecting tollways Texas 45 North and an extension of Loop 1 (MoPac).

The Texas Department of Transportation went out and borrowed a mammoth \$2.2 billion on the bond market, borrowed some federal money, kicked in \$700 million of its own and got \$500 million from local governments and then built a staggering 66 miles of turnpikes between 2003 and 2007. Meanwhile, a new animal authorized under a fresh state law — the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, essentially a toll road agency — opened shop in 2001 and by 2007 had opened its first toll road as well, 183-A in Cedar Park. TxDOT built a fifth tollway using tax money, Texas 45 Southeast, which opened this spring.

The final toll: almost 78 miles in a connected system.

Well, not final, exactly. TxDOT unveiled a wave of seven more proposed toll roads here in 2004, and the area's transportation board rushed it through to approval three months later.

## **Enter Sal Costello**

Anyone who doubts what activists can get done, or undone, need only look at the wave of anti-tollinistas spawned by that second Austin toll road plan and the toll-centric policies of Gov. Rick Perry and his alter ego on the Texas Transportation Commission, Ric Williamson . The morning after the July 2004 vote authorizing that Phase 2 toll plan, most people assumed that the 16-7 vote by the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization board was the end of the story and that Central Texas would have 12 toll roads by the end of the decade.

Not Costello, a graphics designer who had gotten involved in the weeks leading up to the vote. He formed a group called the Austin Toll Party (later expanded statewide), moved to recall three Austin City Council members who had voted for it (with no success) and over the next three years generally made life hard for any public official who didn't disavow tolls. Too hard, some said, citing Costello's willingness to publish on his Web site what were often unsubstantiated or exaggerated charges about officials' private lives.

Other anti-toll groups sprang up in San Antonio and in Fayette County, that last one devoted to bringing down Perry and Williamson's Trans-Texas Corridor plan to crisscross the state with supertollways.

None of that second cohort of Austin-area toll roads has been built, and only one appears likely to happen anytime soon. No toll roads have been built in San Antonio. The Trans-Texas Corridor plan died, and the privately financed and operated toll roads at the heart of it fell into disrepute at the Legislature. Toll roads are a permanent part of the Texas mix now, but only a part rather than the focus, and Texas politicians are talking again about using more traditional ways to raise money for roads.

Costello, who said his own private life had been frayed by his anti-toll obsession, in 2008 moved to a small town in southern Illinois. Williamson died two years ago. Perry is running for office again, so some things don't change.

Another thing that didn't change: the gas tax, locked in since the early 1990s at 20 cents a gallon for the state and 18.4 cents a gallon for the federal government and losing ground to inflation year after year.

## **In-the-Red Line**

Building a light-rail network had been discussed throughout the 1990s, but the concept didn't see a public ballot until November 2000. Voters narrowly rejected that 52-mile, \$1.9 billion system. But Capital Metro, having saved up more than \$200 million with rail in mind, in 2004 went back to voters with a much more modest proposal — \$90 million, they said, deliverable by early 2008 — for a single commuter line on existing track between Leander and downtown Austin.

We're still waiting for the 32-mile Red Line to open, and the agency now says it will cost \$105 million, a figure that excludes tens of millions of dollars spent on facilities directly related to the passenger line. That \$200 million surplus had all but disappeared by this year as revenue from Capital Metro's principal source of money, a 1 percent sales tax, has been in a 15-month swoon. The transit agency, meanwhile, spent the last half of the decade in near-constant turmoil with its union, endured two short strikes for seeking wage and benefit cuts, and recently fired its rail operations contractor.

Capital Metro's longtime board president, Lee Walker, left in 2008; its longest-serving chief executive officer, Fred Gilliam, retired in the fall. A newly constituted board, ordered up by the Legislature, is about to take office. The rail line, Capital Metro officials say, will open — two years late — sometime before March 31.

# Capital MetroRail - Red Line Map



Courtesy of JB Goodwin