



Written by [Gary Benoit](#) on January 15, 2009

Trans Texas Corridor Renamed, Not Dead

A familiar plant along Texas roadways is the prickly pear cactus. It sports the most beautiful flowers when in bloom, but the most wicked thorns imaginable. In periods of drought, cattle often eat the fruit, seeking water stored there, only to suffer the miseries of having the awful thorns stuck in their lips and tongues, becoming costly to the owners. The plants' blooms are beautiful, but they are still cactus.



So it goes with the Trans Texas Corridor (TTC), the first leg of a planned superhighway meant to bring Chinese goods into the United States via Mexican ports — bypassing more expensive American ports and workers. (See “Express Route to Poverty” in our October 15, 2007 issue.) On January 6, Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) Executive Director Amadeo Saenz issued a statement for Governor Rick Perry’s beleaguered transportation project and declared the TTC “dead.” After facing a very hostile public when the last legislative session failed to kill the project, TxDOT offered a revamped vision for the TTC, including a new proposal entitled *Innovative Connectivity in Texas/Vision 2009*, outlining updated guidelines for development of the TTC. The document describes the evolution of the original TTC plan, and how the “new” plan will be better — but it simply promises new blooms among the dangerous thorns of the original TTC plan.

Among the new growth that’s supposed to tempt Texans/Americans into sampling the wicked fruit are proposals to alter the use of existing facilities by reducing the corridor’s width (from 1200’ to 600’), assigning specific transportation modes (rail, truck, or passenger) only to certain highway segments, and promising increased involvement for local officials and citizens. Beware the thorns.

One big “sticker” has to do with the manner in which the project will be financed. The new “vision” says, “To accelerate transportation projects, TxDOT may now authorize a governmental or private entity to build or operate any part of a corridor-related project, and may enter into Comprehensive



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Development Agreements (CDAs) in order to deliver highway and rail components.” Wait a minute. One of the original complaints Texans lodged against the scheme was the state’s signed contract with a foreign private company, Cintra of Spain, to develop the corridor. That contract authorized Cintra to develop and build the road, after making a cash payment to the state, then to collect mandatory tolls from users for the next 50 years! TxDOT says that it has “successfully partnered with private sector firms ... using CDA’s,” yet TxDOT’s partnership with Cintra could be called anything but successful. Texans made it loud and clear that they disagreed with the whole boondoggle, and didn’t much cotton to the idea of being ripped off, successful or otherwise.

Texas/Vision 2009 also vows that “information relating to toll projects be made publicly accessible at earlier and more frequent points throughout the process,” and that “a public hearing on the information is now required prior to execution of the CDA contract.” That sounds nice and squishy, but says nothing substantive. There’s no language about the public being given the opportunity to affect the decisions, just to know about them. And after experiencing the arrogance of TxDOT in the past, there’s virtually no reason to believe that the public can alter decisions: in recent years, TxDOT took heat for not being more forthcoming with the public regarding all the plans relating to the TTC. In fact, a suit was filed just to force the agency to finally release the contract so that Texans could read the terms!

Under another heading in the document entitled “More Than Just a Road,” we find TxDOT’s promise to “build only those projects that serve unique regional needs and that can be integrated into a comprehensive statewide transportation project.” Again, no improvement. The original plan would have built the road in segments anyway, segments connecting into one long highway. The commitment to integrating the network of roads still stands, apparently. What a con.

Most frightening is this statement: “This plan is a living document that will be updated over the next 50 years as transportation needs change.” Any time the words *living* and *document* are strung together it is cause for pause. All that means is that it’s subject to change at anyone’s whim.

What Texans really want to read in the document isn’t there. There’s nothing written that laws passed during the last six years allowing this project have been changed. Nor that past contracts have been declared void. Nor that the concessions granted to Cintra have been rescinded. Nor that the goods and people the corridor was expected to accommodate will quit coming. Conceptually, the project goes full steam ahead.

TxDOT continues to pretend that this is a Texas project designed to help Texans get around. In fact, Governor Rick Perry and the late Ric Williamson, then head of the Texas Transportation Commission are on record stating that all Texas roads will eventually be tolled, and have viewed the TTC as a revenue project, not a traffic solution. The TTC does nothing to address Texans’ legitimate complaints about rush hour traffic, but will destroy rural Texas. The TTC and other planned corridors do not address the problems on existing roads, and one of them, La Entrada al Pacifico, is actually routed through the least populated area of the state! Since the TTC has very limited on/off ramps, it will place drivers in a position of having to drive many miles out of their way to get off the road. A solution in need of a problem, the corridor will really serve as a pipeline for the massive and deadly infusion of “trade” from China.

One South Texas judge hoorayed the project as a way to benefit financially as an accommodation for the “tsunami of freight” headed our way from Mexico. Freight arriving at deep-water ports on Mexico’s west coast and off-loaded will be hurled unsecured up America’s center via the TTC. Therein lies the real problem. To determine the validity of the claim that the TTC is dead, one need only look to



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Mexico's ports at Lazaro Cardenas and Topolobampo and find out if construction has halted. If it hasn't, then TxDOT's claims don't mean much. For without the TTC, those ports don't have a job.

Texas/Vision 2009 is really a new name for an old nemesis. TxDOT has merely decided to put the original name to rest. According to the *Dallas Morning News*, Governor Perry offhandedly confirmed this from Iraq on the day of the announcement, "The fact of the matter is that we don't really care what name they attach to building infrastructure in the state of Texas. The key is that we have to go forward and build the infrastructure so that the state of Texas and our economy can continue to grow." He noted that the most important part of the plan to him, its reliance on private capital to help finance toll roads, remains a key priority and an approach he expects will be continued: "We'll continue to use all the tools available to build the infrastructure."

Earlier this month, the Texas Legislature reconvened, as it does every other year. It seems fishy that TxDOT's statement was issued just in time to allow Texans and their lawmakers to breathe a sign of relief about not having to worry about that pesky corridor anymore. No time for complacency, this. A capitol insider has already targeted a piece of legislation to watch this session. The TxDOT Sunset Bill will be presented to the legislature as it decides TxDOT's future, and should spur debate over Public Private Partnerships, which are almost more dangerous than the road itself.

TxDOT's existence as an agency will have to be reauthorized. As required by state law, TxDOT was reviewed last summer, as it is every seven years, by the Sunset Commission, and had its hind parts blistered by the review panel for its handling of the TTC. So the new proposal is likely meant to, among other things, reduce negative clamor at the review hearings because the bill will tell the agency what it can and can't do. Tied to the bill is the debate over whether Texas should enter Public Private Partnerships — the funding mechanism for the superhighway. If Texas, as a highway donor state at the federal level, could keep the funds snatched away from it by the U.S. government, it would actually have money to pay for needed road projects. If focus could be shifted against the Public Private Partnerships, the anti-corridor folks would really have some teeth.

The Texas cowboy still exists who has burned the thorns off the prickly pear with a pear-burner. This kerosene-fueled torch was small enough to carry into pastures and flame the thorns from the water-containing pears (fruit) of the cactus plant. Many a rancher has sustained his herd in times of drought by making this source of life-giving water available till the rains came. Let's burn the thorns off the Trans Texas Corridor, keeping in mind, as any cowhand knows, that when you put the pear-burner to the thorns, you have to be vigilant about the rattlesnakes that slither away from their just-torched nests.



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