

Published January 9, 2003

Reprinted with permission of the *Dallas Morning News*

Despite critics, electronic message boards that give drivers latest on roads, weather are called Street signs of 'intelligence'

By Laura Griffin, Staff Writer

If you drive on Northwest Highway, Preston Road or Royal or Forest lanes, you've seen them.

They're hard to miss.

Dallas has installed seven "intelligent" message signs around town. In the next month or so, the electronic signs will flash warnings about traffic tie-ups, severe weather and missing children.

By March, 19 more will be in place, mostly around Fair Park, and by 2007, there will be 48 throughout the city.

"This is going to be fabulous for people like me - for all of us who, when we get stuck in traffic, our Type A personalities take over, and we wonder what's the alternate route to get around this mess," Assistant City Manager Jill Jordan said. "These signs will give people plenty of time to plan alternatives. And the messages on the signs will actually pertain to the current time. Not something earlier."

But some people are not happy with the signs near their neighborhoods - or the fact that they didn't know they were coming.

"We didn't hear anything about it until after they were in place," said Jo Eklof, who has lived in the Preston Royal area for 29 years. "They're too big, and I don't think they're appropriate for the neighborhood. The money could have been better spent."

Sixty percent of the \$8.7 million project will be paid for with federal funds. City bonds from 1995 and 1998 will pay \$983,000, and the state and county will pick up the rest.

"Yes, they're pretty big, but this is a standardized size across the nation," Ms. Jordan said. "It gives you plenty of time to read the sign. It should help reduce driver frustration, reduce commute time and also help clean our air."

Those arguments don't wash with some neighbors near the sign on Preston Road, which will warn commuters of tie-ups on LBJ Freeway early enough for them to divert onto Forest Lane.

Complaints include the sign's aesthetics and the possibility of driver distraction.

"The signs don't offend me. In fact, I think the purpose is nice, but they could be distracting for drivers," said Terry O'Connor, who lives near Preston Road. "If American Airlines had to take them down because they were too distracting at the airport, why aren't they too distracting for city traffic?"

Ms. Jordan said the signs differ from those that were once at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Those had smaller lettering and contained long lists of cities and gates.

Concise messages

“This is going to be something that is succinct,” she said.

Tim Kerr lives under a sign on Preston Road in a house he rents from Tom and Dolly Martin, who also live nearby.

All were flabbergasted by the size and location of the sign the day it went up.

“I couldn’t believe there was no warning,” Mr. Kerr said. “It’s an eyesore, and I think it’s really going to affect Tom’s property value. Luckily, we have a high fence and bushes, so we can’t see it from the house.

“But this neighborhood is getting rebuilt with mansions and two-story homes. If you put a two-story house on this lot, you’d definitely be able to see it from the second floor,” he said.

Mr. Martin said his concern is for the entire neighborhood.

“I think it’s degrading to an area comparable to ours,” he said. “It’s OK for a freeway but too big for a neighborhood street. And frankly, I’m concerned with what messages it will have - it could become political. I see some ‘Drink & Drive & Go to Jail’ signs - we all know that. That’s a waste of taxpayer money.”

Ms. Jordan said the city staff worked to find the least-obtrusive spots for the signs.

“They tried to hide them between trees and homes,” she said. “They stood in yards and tried to make sure we were placing them where homeowners would not have to look at them from their living rooms.”

Beth Ramirez, program manager for the city’s traffic management systems, said the signs would be used primarily to assist traffic flow but would also let people know about a tornado warning or an Amber alert for a missing child.

Dark most of time

“They’ll be dark most of the time unless there’s something big,” she said.

The city’s Intelligent Transportation Systems photographically record traffic along Dallas freeways. That information helps the city spot accidents and traffic back-ups and will soon be relayed to the message signs to alert motorists, Ms. Ramirez said.

“Once you’ve committed yourself to a ramp, it’s too late and you’re stuck,” she said. “But if you know ahead of time that you don’t want to take that route, you can take an alternative one.”

That’s just what neighbors in the University Manor area are concerned about. Because they’re near Northwest Highway, Abrams Road and Skillman Street, they’ve had problems with people cutting through their neighborhood - so much so that the city installed speed bumps along Walling Lane.

“If all the motorists are alerted that there are traffic problems ahead, the only escape will be through the local neighborhood,” said Charlie Ramirez of Merriman Park/University Manor Neighborhood Association. “Considering how many people, myself included, try to find another way out when traffic jams, our neighborhood can expect to be flooded with cars the first time a warning gets posted.”

E-mail lgriffin@dallasnews.com