

In The News

The Trinity River Toll Road is Dead, and Dallas has Angela Hunt to Thank for it

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Angela Hunt, dressed in the former council member's now-familiar red, walked into Dallas City Council chambers Wednesday knowing the outcome of the vote. By morning's end, the Trinity River toll road would be dead.

The council made it clear last week that a 9-mile-long parkway between the earthen levees, running from Interstate 35E and State Highway 183 in the north to U.S. Highway 175 southwest of downtown, was, after two decades of contentious debate and knee-deep bull, a no-go. Even the mayor, once among the road's biggest proponents, along with 20 years' worth of mayors who preceded him, could find no reason to keep it alive.

There is no money. There is no will. There is no way.

So when the council voted at 10:11 a.m. to kill what it known as Alternative 3C — the only roadway between the levees approved by the federal government — its demise was already a done deal, the vote little more than a formality. Only two council members voted to spare the road: Pleasant Grove's Rickey Callahan, who said this was the dashing of a 30-year-long dream to easily connect his constituents to jobs in the north, and southwest Dallas' Casey Thomas, who said nothing.

The vote, overwhelming and unimaginable but two years ago, did not stop Hunt from tearing up, just a bit, and reveling in the moment. She had waited for this since 2007, when, as a young council member, she led the special citywide referendum to kill the road that was thwarted by road-builders, landowners, politicians and Dallas Citizens Council members who made it their life's mission to sink Hunt's efforts.

"You always think it's going to be anticlimactic when the dog chasing the car gets its teeth around the tire," Hunt said as we sat outside chambers moments after the vote. She grinned. "But let me tell you, it's not."

Brooks Love worked with Hunt to kill the road a decade ago. The city's former elections administrator sat with her during Wednesday's vote, and took a congratulatory selfie once the vote went down. He stepped outside chambers to give Hunt a long, deep sigh of a hug. He then turned around and left us to talk.

"I am gonna go sit in my car and cry for a while," Love said, making little attempt to hide tears of joy.

"Thank you for everything," Hunt said.

There is no doubt: This is a great day for the city, too long in coming. We were told, again and again, a high-speed, six-lane road between the levees was needed to relieve congestion along Interstates 30 and 35E, that the Horseshoe project could not be done without it, that Dead Man's Curve on 175 couldn't be straightened without it. And we were told, by then-Mayor Tom Leppert in 2009, "there are a lot of buckets" of money waiting to be poured into the road.

Each selling point was a lie. Eventually, those lies ran out of road.

In the end, only Callahan pleaded to spare the Trinity Parkway, insisting, as he has all along, that it is needed to rescue residents stranded in a part of town absent access to the high-paying jobs north of the river. He remains the last of the True Believers, and he tried to convince the city attorney that the council could not simply overrule the will of the people, who, Callahan said, had twice voted for the road — in 1998, during the first Trinity River Corridor Project bond proposition, then again in 2007, when Hunt tried to kill it.

Larry Casto told Callahan sorry, but no. The short answer, said the city attorney, "is the citizens have never said, 'Thou shalt.'"

Eventually, Callahan was forced to deliver a concession speech, thanking all those who'd supported the road — ex-mayors, former council members, the rich and powerful. And he chastised the southern Dallas council members who said they want jobs in their districts, not just a toll road to somewhere else.

"I am dismayed and disillusioned and disappointed in the actions you took," Callahan said. "How could so many former great leaders be wrong."

North Dallas' Sandy Greyson, who opposed the road even before Hunt was on the council, did not speak until after the votes were counted. She beamed from the horseshoe. But, she said, she wanted to make it very clear: This was not just her day, or the council's, or Dallas'.

"If it's anybody day, it is Angela Hunt's day," Greyson said. The chambers, almost full, stood and looked toward Hunt, sitting in the center, near the back.

Hunt stood for a moment, nodding, soaking it in. She mouthed, "Thank you."

After the vote, she could have gloated, taken a victory lap, given a proper thrashing to those doomsayers who spent years vilifying her as an obstructionist, an aginner. But she did no such thing.

"It's personally rewarding, and it gives me faith in the city of Dallas," she said instead. "I think now it's clear we have an incredible opportunity to have a park that unifies our city that won't be destroyed by a high-speed toll road, that won't be threatened by that specter. My hope is we can move forward as a united city toward that goal."

Then she went back into chambers, where the council was arguing over how to build that park.

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