

Fresno's Willow-Nees road expansion about to start

By George
Hostetter



Traffic backs up on southbound Willow Avenue at Nees Avenue on Monday, Oct. 20. Fresno officials announced the Willow Avenue Widening Project on Monday. The city intends to correct one of its most serious traffic bottlenecks by widening portions of both streets. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

Fresno City Hall is ready to tackle one of the city's most maddening traffic bottlenecks — Willow and Nees avenues.

City officials gathered on a corner of this busy northeast Fresno intersection Monday morning to trumpet the start of a long-planned project to widen the streets.

Before you know it, officials said, all of southbound Willow from Shepherd to Alluvial avenues will be three lanes. A stretch south of Nees is now one lane.

The one-lane portion of Nees as it T-bones into Willow will grow to two lanes.

There will be six months or so of inconvenience during construction, Public Works Director Scott Mozier said. The result, he added, will be "enormous long-term gain" for public safety and effective transportation.

The cost is about \$4 million. The money comes from federal grants and Measure C, the Fresno County transportation sales tax.

Monday's news conference was a strange one. After all, the topic is so mundane. City crews work on Fresno's street grid year-around, maintaining and adjusting things to meet changing needs. What's the big deal about Willow/Nees?

There are two answers. The first is growth.

Fresno and Clovis meet at Willow. It wasn't too many decades ago that Willow north of Herndon was nothing but farmhouses, packing sheds, range grass and coyotes. Today, it's the Mother Lode of development, especially on the street's west (Fresno) side.

The news conference was held on the southwest corner of Willow/Nees. The spot is still dirt and a few fruit trees bearing witness to a simpler past. The other three corners feature gleaming neighborhood shopping centers, two of them anchored by big gas stations selling fuel to a car-crazed populace at well below \$4 a gallon. Houses, mega-churches and schools most likely will soon fill both sides of Willow all the way to Copper Avenue (where the foothills look close enough to touch).

With all that humanity and commerce in play, the smooth movement of cars and trucks is priority No. 1. Fresno City Hall on Monday was understandably proud of itself for advancing the people's business.

Which brings up answer No. 2 — bottlenecks.

The term "bottleneck" has been a storied part of Fresno's transportation debate for more than a half-century. The term is flexible enough to encompass many situations. The common thread is a traffic jam.

But "bottleneck" in the last 25 years has come to spotlight what critics see as an unholy alliance of City Hall incompetence and developer greed. Growth is proposed. Development is to pay its own way. When it comes, the growth is piecemeal. Developers in this formerly rural area build two or three brand-new traffic lanes in front of their project. But either side of the project remains rural for the time being, with one traffic lane. Bottleneck mania. Through it all, City Hall dozes while motorists suffer.

That's the accepted wisdom in some quarters. Others say the reality is more complex.

What is indisputable is that Fresno has its share of streets that force vehicular traffic to navigate sudden constrictions — the classic bottleneck.

There's nothing uniform about the array of traffic lanes on each side of Willow from Herndon to Copper. But for the most part, there are two or three in each direction wherever there's concentrated development.

The one glaring exception is that crazy southwest corner of Willow and Nees, sitting there with its one lane as if the place thinks it's still 1970. The reasons for officialdom's foot-dragging — landowner disputes, money woes — now are history.

Council Member Lee Brand, who represents northeast Fresno, said a new era dawns at the intersection in spring 2015.

Contact George Hostetter: ghostetter@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6272.

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Relief on the way

The city of Fresno said Monday it plans to begin a project to widen southbound Willow from Shepherd to Alluvial avenues and eastbound Nees to Willow.

