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## **December OTA Board Meeting Wrap-Up**

### **First ACCESS Oklahoma project gets green light from OTA Board**

The Oklahoma Turnpike Authority Board gave unanimous approval Tuesday to award the first construction contract for the ACCESS Oklahoma long-range plan. A more than \$98 million contract was awarded to Duit Construction Co. to widen the I-44/Turner Turnpike to six lanes between Bristow and Kellyville in Creek County. This project connects with the previous six-lane widening completed during the Driving Forward program from Sapulpa to Kellyville. This is the second highest single dollar amount construction contract awarded in OTA history, behind the Gilcrease Expressway construction in Tulsa.

As part of this project, OTA also will add a new interchange on I-44/Turner Turnpike at SH-66 (mm 203) near Heyburn to improve community and emergency response access to this area. Work is expected to begin by early spring 2024 and will take nearly two years to complete. Motorists can expect two lanes in each direction to remain open during peak travel times, but significant lane shifts and possible night-time narrowing to one lane may occur throughout the work zone between just east of Bristow at mm 197 and SH-66 (mm 203).

“This is our first step for ACCESS and it’s an extremely exciting one,” said Secretary of Transportation and OTA Executive Director Tim Gatz. “Getting that section down to Bristow widened to the full six-lane width is really a red-letter day for the Turnpike Authority. We’re pretty excited about it and we’re looking forward to getting that work done. We’ll have six more miles that will be far safer and prepared for the future. The new access point to the turnpike (at SH-66) will be a difference maker for the area.”

More than 37,000 vehicles travel this section of the I-44/Turner Turnpike on average, but traffic is projected to increase to more than 63,000 vehicles per day by 2041.

[ACCESS Oklahoma](#), which stands for Advancing and Connecting Communities and Economies Safely Statewide, is a 15-year long-range plan to provide upgrades to turnpike infrastructure including widening projects on the I-44/Turner Turnpike, I-44/Will Rogers Turnpike and the John Kilpatrick Turnpike while also adding new interchanges along existing turnpikes, upgrading bridges and modernizing existing interchanges. The plan also includes three new turnpike routes in south Oklahoma City and the Norman area to complete the Outer Loop in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area while also relieving growing traffic congestion along the southern I-35 corridor. OTA sold the first \$500 million in bonds in late October that will fund engineering design work and the initial projects in the long-range plan.

### **Board awards Indian Nation Turnpike cashless conversion project**

The Board also approved a \$9.4 million contract to Built Right Construction for one of the final cashless conversion construction projects for next year. The work will prepare the SH-375/Indian Nation Turnpike in Southeastern Oklahoma to convert to cashless tolling by late 2024. Additionally, this project includes adding cable barrier at the SH-3 interchange and adding shoulders at the SH-9 Eufaula tolling point to allow for two,

full through lanes once the cashless conversion completes. Work is expected to begin by spring 2024 and motorists can expect intermittent lane closures throughout the Indian Nation Turnpike.

Since 2021, nine turnpikes have fully converted to cashless tolling under OTA's PlatePay system. This means that motorists on those turnpikes now have non-stop travel. Photos will be taken of license plates and those not associated with a PIKEPASS, PlusPass or interoperable account will be mailed a monthly PlatePay invoice. Tolls owed may be paid online at the motorist's convenience at [www.platepay.com](http://www.platepay.com). The final three turnpikes — I-44/Turner Turnpike, I-44/Will Rogers and SH-375/Indian Nation Turnpike — are on schedule to convert to cashless tolling by the end of 2024. PIKEPASS account customers will continue to receive the lowest toll rate and can learn more about how to sign up at [www.pikepass.com](http://www.pikepass.com).

"I always want to put an emphasis on the reason we're converting to PlatePay. ... Our motivation is the safety of the traveling public and the accident histories that we saw developing and continuing to grow around those tolling plazas," Sec. Gatz said Tuesday. "We knew going into this that PlatePay would have some challenges ahead of us; we will overcome those challenges through concerted and diligent effort. I'm optimistic that we're going to make some significant progress across the course of the coming budgetary year."

### **Board approves 2024 budget**

The Board also gave final approval Tuesday to the 2024 budget, which breaks down as follows:

- Projected revenue of nearly \$400 million;
- \$156 million for operations and maintenance;
- Just more than \$100 million for the capital projects;
- Just more than \$43 million for the required reserve maintenance deposit; and
- \$1.2 million is budgeted for the operation and maintenance of the Gilcrease Expressway in the non-system trust agreement.

"I always appreciate the effort and the seriousness that the team takes in preparing the budget for presentation to you," Gatz told the Board. "The Turnpike Authority, I believe from a budgetary standpoint has an exceptional process where we bring this budget to you in anticipation of what we're going to try to accomplish in the coming year then we follow it and subsequently report out our progress in our annual financial report at the end of the year."

Director of Finance Wendy Smith, in presenting the budget to the Board, noted that the operations and maintenance budget saw a 13 percent increase above last year's budget due in part to these changes:

- The Oklahoma Highway Patrol will add 16 new troopers to the turnpike system, which increased the budget by \$2.7 million.
- The Authority expects to see higher postage, printing, license plate lookup costs as well as bank service charges increasing as part of the agency's ongoing cashless conversion. This budget also includes cash tolling staff through the end of 2024 on the I-44/Turner Turnpike, I-44/Will Rogers Turnpike and SH-375/Indian Nation Turnpike. The total budget increase for cashless tolling expenses is nearly \$10 million.
- The ongoing cashless conversion also is increasing needs in OTA's Customer Service area, which plans to add an additional 45 service representatives at an estimated \$3.7 million in the next year to handle the increasing call volume. OTA Customer Service reached a new milestone in August of having handled 109,000 calls that month marking the first time since the call center's inception that it reached the more than 100,000 call mark.

- With unprecedented low unemployment, attracting qualified applicants and retaining good employees is a priority for the Authority. This budget represents a market adjustment for two hard-to-fill job classifications. Transportation Equipment Operators will be classified as Heavy Transportation Equipment Operators, which increased the budget by \$1.3 million. Customer Service representatives also were market adjusted increasing the projected budget by about \$3.2 million. The Authority is looking at additional market adjustments in early 2024 as part of its efforts to retain personnel in key job categories.

TO WATCH the full meeting, see the video at [OTA Board Meeting December 12, 2023 \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTA Board Meeting December 12, 2023).



Work will begin by spring 2024 to continue widening the I-44/Turner Turnpike to six lanes from SH-66 (mm 203) to just east of Bristow at mm 197. As shown in the photo, SH-66 crosses above the turnpike and this \$98 million project also will add a new interchange at this location.