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OTA prepares for next steps of the South Extension Turnpike design process as part of ACCESS Oklahoma plan

Since the announcement Sept. 23 of the new South Extension Turnpike alignment in Norman, Noble and near Purcell, the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority has met with nearly 750 property owners and homeowners at three open houses in Norman and Noble. Many who attended were in the path or near the new alignment, OTA Executive Director Joe Echelle reported to the OTA Board at its monthly meeting Tuesday.

The alignment, available to view at accessoklahoma.com, was identified as having the least impact on homes with 75 needing to be acquired for the 19-mile-long project in Cleveland and McClain counties. This number is comparable with the original alignment from 2022 that was closer to Lake Thunderbird.

Next, OTA will begin surveys and studies of the area to aid in the engineering work necessary to prepare right-of-way and design plans in early 2026. OTA encourages homeowners to stay in touch with the agency directly throughout this process to provide them with more information as it becomes available. The best contact is to email info@accessoklahoma.com or call the ACCESS Oklahoma hotline at 1-844-56-ACCESS (1-844-562-2237).

2026 preliminary budgets approved

OTA's Director of Finance Wendy Smith presented the 2026 preliminary operating and maintenance budget in the amount of \$165.1 million and a capital budget of \$165 million. The preliminary budget represents a 5.62 percent increase above the 2025 operations budget. This \$8.8 million increase represented the transfer of budgeted funding from the general fund to operations for certain projects, including expenses related to having an entirely cashless tolling system, such as increased credit card fees and other expenses related to PlatePay and interoperability fees.

Oversight and continued implementation of the ACCESS Oklahoma long-range plan, including expenses such as staffing, legal and bond-related costs, is also included in the budget increase.

The board voted unanimously to accept the preliminary budget and will consider for approval the final 2026 budget at the Nov. 4 Board meeting. In accordance with OTA's trust agreement, the board also approved the 2026 preliminary operating and maintenance budget for the Gilcrease Turnpike in the amount of \$1.4 million. OTA Director Joe Echelle noted that keeping the operational budget flat in 2026 will allow OTA to increase reinvestment in the capital budget for more significant maintenance projects across the system for the safety of Oklahoma's motorists.

Smith also reported that toll revenues for August 2025 on the Oklahoma turnpike system were \$41.9 million, an increase of 26.5 percent as compared with August 2024. Total transactions grew by 2.6 percent compared with last year with heavy truck traffic continuing to remain strong in that same period. Year-to-date toll revenues continue to outpace budgeted projections by 8.5 percent.

Haikey Creek Bridge lane closures this week, construction starts in November

Director Echelle provided an update on the Haikey Creek bridge rehabilitation project on SH-364/Creek Turnpike in Broken Arrow, where construction is expected to begin in early November. This week, the initial work zone set up will require lane closures in each direction Wednesday and Thursday nights to place construction barrier wall.

Motorists can expect ongoing traffic impacts starting about Nov. 10 when all traffic will be moved to the westbound bridge so demolition work can begin on the eastbound bridge. Traffic will be configured for two lanes eastbound and one lane westbound. Construction on the nearly \$72 million bridge rehabilitation project is expected to be completed by summer 2027 and as early as spring 2027. Commuters are encouraged to plan for possible delays during peak commute times.

OTA highlights Work Zone Safe program ahead of National Teen Driver Safety Week

Tom Robins, founder of the Work Zone Safe program, shared more about the important work being done to educate teen drivers about the faces and families behind every flashing light and cone. In partnership with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation and OTA, Work Zone Safe focuses on creating a hands-on educational experience for young people in Oklahoma through a partnership with Oklahoma Challenge. To date, 50,000 teens have attended an in-person safety course. Additionally, at workzonesafe.com, more than 112,000 Oklahoma teens hoping to earn their driver license have taken the online course, which includes videos, quizzes and powerful testimonials where teens are introduced to the faces and stories of the construction workers, stories of those killed and their families who have been impacted. Other states including Wisconsin, North Carolina, Kansas, Missouri, and Connecticut have adopted programs modeled by the one created right here in Oklahoma. National Teen Driver Safety Week is Oct. 20-24. Robins earned those listening to please remind the teens in their life to keep their eyes up, phone down, buckle up and always slow down in work zones.

Ladan Nelson named Member of the Year by WTS International Oklahoma

At the October board meeting, WTS International's Oklahoma chapter president Sarah Kellert recognized OTA's ACCESS Oklahoma Program Manager Ladan Nelson, as the 2025 WTS Oklahoma Member of the Year.

"Fearless, approachable and committed to lifting others as she climbs," Kellert said. "Ladan embodies the very best of our industry and our mission. The honor is awarded annually to a member whose spirit, commitment, and leadership embody the heart of WTS. Nelson was recognized for her years of service to the transportation industry in Oklahoma and for her grit, vision and dedication to strengthening Oklahoma's infrastructure. Her work includes important projects with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation such as the \$75 million I-40 widening project in Del City and her leadership on ACCESS Oklahoma."



WTS International's Oklahoma chapter recently recognized ACCESS Oklahoma Program Manager Ladan Nelson as the chapter's Member of the Year. Pictured, from left, are OTA Deputy Director Joni Seymour, OTA employee and WTS member Rhonda Powell, Executive Director Joe Echelle, Ladan Nelson, WTS Chapter President Sarah Kellert, OTA Chief Financial Officer Julie Porter and Chief Engineer Trent January.