



## Dallas-area transit officials compile legislative wish lists

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Published: 16 December 2012 10:50 PM

North Texas transit officials are compiling their legislative wish lists as they wait for the next session of the Legislature to begin in January.

While much of the transportation policy talk in Austin is expected to center on funding and perennial hot-button issues like red-light cameras and texting while driving, the 140-day session is also critical to advancing the region's broader mobility goals.

Based on interviews with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition, the North Texas Tollway Authority, Dallas Area Rapid Transit and the Denton County Transportation Authority, here are a few local legislative goals:

**Public-private partnerships:** This financing option, which typically involves highways with toll lanes, has become crucial to advancing road projects in North Texas.

That's especially true since highway funding has dried up in recent years, in part because the state's major transportation revenue generator, a 20-cent-a-gallon motor fuels tax, hasn't been increased since 1991.

The Texas Department of Transportation needs approval from the Legislature to pursue these public-private partnerships, which are also known as "comprehensive development agreements."

Some, like the LBJ Express, are already moving toward completion. Others — like those on State Highway 183 and Interstate 35E north of LBJ Freeway — were approved in the last legislative session.

Officials now plan to ask for authority to pursue such partnerships on I-35E and U.S. Highway 67 south of downtown Dallas and the Loop 9 outer ring project in southern Dallas County.

**Toll enforcement:** Toll scofflaws have become a large — and high-profile — issue for the NTTA, despite efforts to charge fines, track down deadbeats and publicly identify the top offenders.

So the agency is asking legislators for some additional teeth in the law.

The NTTA first wants affirmation from the Legislature that it can issue criminal trespassing notices against scofflaws and ban motorists from their system. That would ensure that the vehicle of such a violator could be towed if he or she happened to be pulled over on an area toll road.

But the agency is especially eager to gain the ability to block habitual offenders' vehicle registration. They've already been in contact with county tax assessor offices and the state Department of Motor Vehicles to help make certain such a block would be enforced.

"This is what we believe is a fairness issue," said NTTA spokeswoman Kim Jackson.

**Cotton Belt commuter rail project:** Regional transportation officials are moving ahead with plans to develop a 62-mile rail corridor from Plano to Fort Worth, even though many details remain unknown.

But as officials seek innovative ways to finance the effort, one critical piece is clear: Lawmakers need to create a special district to help govern the project. That special district would likely have the ability to levy taxes, charge impact fees and pursue grants.

The Cotton Belt corridor could serve as a route for commuters to get from the outer suburbs north of Dallas to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and points beyond in Tarrant County without first having to travel downtown.

It's a major priority for DART, the Council of Governments and other regional stakeholders.

**Other rail options:** The Denton County Transportation Authority is pursuing permission to create local government corporations so it can better partner with DART and the Fort Worth Transportation Authority (known as The T).

DART and The T already have that ability, and DART has used the local government corporation tool, for instance, to partner with Mesquite for bus service.

Additionally, the transit agencies and other planners are pushing legislation that would make it more feasible for public passenger rail to access freight lines. Specifically, officials want to limit the liability of railroad operators who allow public transit on their lines.

**Other driving measures:** The Council of Governments is pushing an effort to integrate the enforcement of all driving requirements, so officials can better know, for example, whether someone's driver's license is up to date or whether a driver owes tolls.

"Why aren't we integrating all these systems and then having some consequences if you don't do this?" said Michael Morris, the Council of Governments' transportation director.

The council is also advocating full funding of the AirCheckTexas Drive a Clean Machine Program, which has in the past offered vouchers to repair or replace older, polluting vehicles. The program's nearly \$25 million budget was drastically cut last year.

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