



# Editorial: Lawmakers must get serious about Texas highways

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Texas House Speaker Joe Straus has been saying he wants a "serious" lawmaking session next year to address the state's basics, transportation being high on his list.

A stiff test will be lawmakers' willingness to get serious about paying the true cost of building and keeping up the state's 80,000-mile roadway network, the nation's largest. They haven't been serious for years, acting like tenants with lame excuses to the landlord for falling behind on the rent.

And so the state finds itself at this juncture: billions of dollars in debt from highway-borrowing programs, toll roads spreading like the West Nile virus, Dallas-Fort Worth pulling projects off its to-do list, and TxDOT warning it will shift into maintenance-only mode in 2014, leaving all new projects on the drawing board.

Meanwhile, the motor fuel tax — the traditional user fee for roadways — has been stuck at the same 20 cents for 20 years and doesn't come close to paying the tab.

This is not a picture to be proud of, especially when prospective new industries come scouting Texas as a place to do business.

Austin has got to get serious about a long-term, sustainable transportation plan.

The fuel tax should have been raised years ago. But bring up that idea today and lawmakers act as if you've offered them a flask of arsenic. They can point to the fate of GOP Rep. Vicki Truitt of Keller, who carried a bill in 2009 to give voters in metro areas the mere right to *raise their own* transportation taxes, a bill this newspaper strongly supported. It died in the House. Truitt was trounced in her bid for an eighth term last month by a no-new-taxes opponent.

Straus' challenge will be coaxing new highway money out of a House that's afraid to be accused of coming up with new money. His best chance may be an idea from Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, to tap the sales tax on new vehicles. That money is now poured into the general fund, but it makes sense to consider it a legitimate user fee that should help shore up the underfunded highway system.

Other revenue sources we'd like to see opened up include higher vehicle registration fees, a politically risky move but one backed by the Texas Association of Business, and capitalizing an unused portion of the rainy day fund for highway projects.

Another key to reliable funding for the Texas Department of Transportation — today, a leaner, streamlined agency — is ending the practice of siphoning money from the highway fund and transferring it to other agencies. Gov. Rick Perry has been calling for "truth in budgeting" so that a tax or fee collected for a particular purpose is used just for that. That's a constructive position, but this newspaper would also like the governor to protect the back of lawmakers who want to be more aggressive in securing highway dollars.

## Highway funding measures

Here are some of the steps lawmakers should consider to fund state roadways:

Boost the motor fuel tax by 10 cents a gallon.

Shift the 6.25 percent tax on new motor vehicles from the general fund to the highway fund, over time.

Add \$50 to the state's annual vehicle registration fee.

Phase out the practice of tapping the highway fund for nonhighway uses.

Take an unused portion of the rainy day fund and capitalize it.