



## Senate transportation funding bill may mean more toll roads for Dallas-Fort Worth drivers

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Congress sent North Texas a clear message this week: You're largely on your own when it comes to paying for highways, bridges and trains.

For drivers here, that will likely mean even more tolls in an area that is already one of the most tolled in the country. Some projects, like the planned Interstate 35E expansion between Dallas and Denton, may be scaled back as competition for scarce federal funds remains tight.

The U.S. Senate voted Wednesday to keep federal transportation spending flat over the next two years. That dashed hopes that Washington would find new money to help fast-growing regions like Dallas confront aging highways and bridges, skyrocketing populations and increasingly dangerous air pollution.

"We're headed for a train wreck," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "We are just buying time."

The Senate bill passed 74-22 and would spend \$109 billion over two years. That's a fraction of the \$500 billion some Democrats had called for when debate began in 2009. Even some who supported a bigger bill said they are just glad the measure passed after three years of talk.

"The action taken by the Senate is welcome news," said Bob Kaufman, a spokesman for the cash-strapped Texas Department of Transportation.

One of his bosses, Bill Meadows of the Texas Transportation Commission, said the bill at least makes planning easier for the agency.

"There has been increasing concern about whether there would even be a federal transportation bill," Meadows said Thursday. "The certainty of having a transportation bill passed and signed into law is very important for state agencies. It tells how much money we've got. That's a big issue to us."

Federal funding accounted for about 31 percent of TxDOT's \$6.5 billion budget for 2012 and 2013. Most of that money came from the Highway Trust Fund, which is supported by the federal motor fuel taxes. The tax adds 18.4 cents onto every gallon of gasoline.

The focus now shifts to the Republican-led House, where deficit hawks and others have held up passage of a \$260 billion, five-year bill that has prompted a torrid negative reaction from mass transit supporters.

That bill, which House leaders are still haggling over, would stop using federal gas taxes to help fund transit projects like major light rail expansions that have become so important to Dallas. DART's \$1.8 billion Green Line, for instance, relied on \$800 million in federal funding.

The House must decide whether to keep pushing its own controversial bill, develop a new one, or get behind the tamer Senate version. It could also punt and insist on another emergency extension.

But whatever it decides, the clock is running. The government's authority to spend gas tax dollars, which mostly fund highways and transportation in general, expires March 31. Without a new bill or an emergency extension, Washington would stop payments to states almost immediately.

While the Senate bill does not include significantly more money for highways or transit, supporters like Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, hailed its passage as progress.

Hutchison said she voted for the bill, in part, because it slightly boosts the percentage of federal gas taxes collected in Texas that must be spent on Texas projects.

Other formula changes, however, could hurt North Texas. Currently, 62.5 percent of the federal funds awarded to Texas are slated for projects in metropolitan areas. The Senate's bill would change that to 50 percent.

In 2013, that could reduce North Texas's share to about \$100 million, instead of an anticipated \$124 million, officials at the North Central Texas Council of Governments said.

The Senate bill also places minor restrictions on privately financed toll roads, though officials here said they aren't likely to interfere with any of North Texas' toll plans.

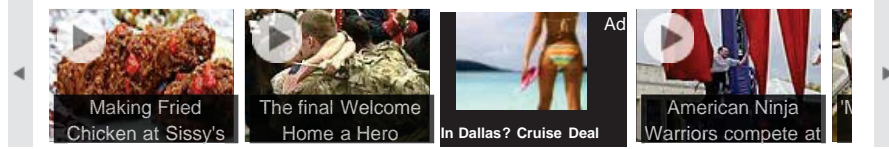
Hutchison tried but failed to persuade her colleagues to support a more robust ban on toll roads — one that would have banned tolls on any highway lanes that are currently free.

Texas allows tolls only on new highways or on new lanes added to existing highways. As cash has dried up, other states are planning tolls on existing highway lanes that are now free.

Texas' other senator voted against the bill. "It's not a very good way to do business, short-term extensions and temporary fixes," [John Cornyn](#), also a [Republican](#), told the web-based news site Politico.

The bill ignores the real problem, he said.

"It's a simple problem of money," he said. "The Highway Trust Fund is broke, and we're trying to figure ways to deal with that. But unfortunately we seem to be piddling around the edges rather than dealing with the root cause."



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