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Officials doubt readiness for cargo windfall

By Kiah Collier
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The state's transportation infrastructure is not ready to handle the shipping windfall many anticipate after an expanded Panama Canal opens for business in 2014, port officials and transportation interest groups told a state legislative committee in Houston on Thursday.

Officials from the [Texas Ports Association](#), the [Texas Motor Transportation Association](#), the Port of Houston and Port of Freeport authorities - and the [Texas Transportation Commission](#) - told the [Texas House Transportation Committee](#) the canal project was a "game changer" that will have a massive impact on Texas.

[Phil Wilson](#), executive director of the [Texas Department of Transportation](#), was less bullish on the upgrade bringing an all-out shipping boom to Texas - especially for imports. But there was agreement that infrastructure already stressed by an exploding population isn't adequate to accommodate larger, more cost-effective "post-Panamax" vessels, or to transport the goods they carry.

Deficiencies discussed included too-shallow port channels, congested roadways and underdeveloped rail lines.

"Texas ports as a whole don't have the depth and capacity to handle post-Panamax ships," Texas Ports Association President [Eduardo Campirano](#) told the committee, which is studying the state's Panama Canal preparedness before the next legislative session begins in January.

Committee members toured Port of Houston operations Wednesday and took public comment during the hearing Thursday at the [Greater Houston Partnership](#)'s downtown office. The hearing began with a crash course from one of the engineers who helped design the \$5 billion canal expansion, which will nearly triple its capacity.

"I do not think that it would be wise to limit our state's vision to merely handling the increase in population," said Tim **Welch, a city councilman in the Fort Worth suburb of North Richland Hills** and a member of TEX-21, a transportation coalition group made up of cities, counties and port and transit authorities. "Texas has the opportunity to be the primary place where goods are imported and exported from the U.S."

In his testimony, Wilson of TxDOT reeled in the hype, telling the committee he has heard "a wide range of opinions" on the effect the expansion will have and said the issue needs further study before the state can determine how best to assist with preparation.

"We won't know for at least several years what the ultimate impact will be," Wilson said, offering assurance TxDOT would assist in readying infrastructure.

Wilson said TxDOT has convened a local stakeholder group, headed by Harris County Judge [Ed Emmett](#), to help "evaluate and prioritize recommendations."

Emmett and others, including [Port of Houston Authority](#) staff, have expressed skepticism that the Panama Canal will significantly boost imports to Texas, saying shippers still may find it more cost-effective to drop cargo on the West Coast for delivery by rail or truck.

In a recent interview with the Chronicle, however, that the canal expansion may present a great opportunity for exports - an


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[Jim Edmonds](#), chairman of Port of Houston Authority commission, noted that Texas is already the largest exporting state. Wilson said focusing on exports "builds on one of our greatest strengths."

Committee member state Rep. [Drew Darby](#), R-San Angelo, asked Wilson to let the committee know what legislation would help TxDOT deal with the infrastructure issues outlined in the hearing.

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