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TxDOT Lobbying Congress For More Revenue Options

As Congressional leaders battle over transportation funding, federal dollars for transit projects are expected to be stretched thin. This month, the Texas Department of Transportation joined the voices calling for federal lawmakers to give states more discretion in how they raise money for roadwork.

TxDOT was among more than 20 transportation-related organizations and specialists that signed on to a letter urging Congress to expand several pilot programs aimed at allowing for more tolling programs and public/private partnerships to fund interstate highways and other roads that receive federal funding.

The letter was sent to members of the conference committee tasked with hashing out a workable compromise measure that can make it to President Obama's desk this year.

The conference includes three Texans: U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, and U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall of Rockwall, both Republicans, and U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, a Dallas Democrat.

"In the absence of new funding sources, at a minimum, Congress should provide states and metropolitan regions with the tools to develop and expand their potential sources of revenue and investment capital," the letter reads. "To that end, federal barriers to state innovation and flexibility should be substantially reduced, and no new ones should be erected."

Congress agreed to a 90-day extension of transportation funding in March, the ninth such extension since the last long-term measure expired in 2009.

Texas currently has more flexibility than most other states regarding transportation project funding but TxDOT is concerned it may lose some of the most valuable tools depending on the language in the bill that comes out of the conference committee, TxDOT spokesman Mark Cross said.

"It's about retaining the current flexibility we have for funding in regard to congestion relief," Cross said.

One such tool is the Value Pricing Pilot Program, which allows states to implement toll systems on certain federally-funded roads. Texas is one of 14 states that currently participates in the program.

Also potentially under the knife are several TxDOT projects in different stages of development that are funded via Comprehensive Development Agreements with private sector partners, Cross said.

"Some of those we've gotten off the ground in the very early stages," Cross said. "We want to make sure that those projects are not affected by some new legislation that could ultimately change the course of funding those projects."

Various groups remain opposed to public/private partnerships in transportation and the trucking industry, among others, are wary of most tolling of highways, according to Emil Frankel, transportation director with the Washington, D.C.-based Bipartisan Policy Center, one of the groups that spearheaded the letter. He said the conference committee is more likely to address the use of private capital in public transportation projects than the tolling issue. Either way, such tools are only going to become more important in states like Texas, he said.

"This will really be the first time that federal funding has not grown probably in the last 50 years," Frankel said. "If the pie is getting smaller, the federal government ought to get out of the way and let states be flexible."