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Among the few useful things you learn in journalism school is the classic definition of news: Dog bites man isn't. Man bites dog is. Under that reasoning, if a Democratic elected official had announced he favored raising taxes at the public hearing I attended yesterday, I would probably still be staring at a blank screen on my computer, wondering what topic to tackle in today's column.

But the man who pronounced that opinion into a microphone at the Texas House County Affairs Committee meeting held in Houston was none other than the unmistakably Republican Steve Radack, commissioner of Harris County Precinct 3.

With sharp population growth in unincorporated areas of Harris County, Radack wants the Texas Legislature to allow county governments to levy a penny sales tax - dedicated exclusively to building and maintaining roads.

"It doesn't matter how liberal or conservative you are, nobody likes to sit for hours in traffic," Radack told me. Citizens of all political stripes, he believes, will support a tax as long as they see the revenue put to use where they can see it - or feel it in shorter commutes and less air pollution. Why should the city have the ability to levy a sales tax, when nearly as many people are now living in unincorporated parts of Harris County, creating demand for more roads?

Imagine a city the size of Phoenix or Philadelphia limited by law to raising money solely through property taxes. The parts of Harris County in unincorporated areas - outside the boundaries of any city - are home to more people than claimed by either of those cities. In fact, some 1.6 million folks reside in the unincorporated parts of Harris County. If those areas formed a city, it would be the fifth largest in the United States.

And yet, unlike Texas municipalities, counties can't levy a sales tax, except through very limited county assistance districts that must be approved by voters.

The policy may have made sense when cities routinely annexed areas that filled up with homes and people. That's just not happening anymore, Radack pointed out. Since the ugly fight that ensued over Houston's annexation of Kingwood, the city has been reluctant to absorb new subdivisions.

Polling conservatives

So the county has become responsible for more roads - but it lacks the ability to enact a sales tax to pay for them. "The city has a penny sales tax," says Radack. "It's common sense for the county to be able to have that one cent too."

Is it political suicide for a good conservative to mention the "T" word? Maybe not. Recently, the American Council of Engineering Companies of Texas conducted focus groups in Houston and Dallas among "self-identified" tea party conservatives to gauge their interest in paying for new roads.

And in spite of the "no-new-taxes-manifesto" (promoted, I might add, by Republican leaders like Gov. Rick Perry), these voters were willing to pay to maintain Texas' roads and highways, says the association's president, Steve Stagner.

"They don't like government or trust," he acknowledged. But, they do "believe one of the few things government should have a role in is paying for infrastructure."

Turning to bonds

Moreover, people understand "there's no such thing as a free lunch," he said. They are willing to pay their fair share in taxes, "if they are convinced it will actually be spent resolving a problem, instead of frittered away."

Fort Bend County Commissioner Grady Prestage agrees with Radack in principal, but supports expanding the use of limited purpose "county assistance districts" as a solution. He believes Radack's more sweeping proposal would never get the Legislature's approval - for strictly political reasons. You can't campaign as a conservative if you've raised taxes.

For the last decade, Texas mobility has suffered because politicians pandered the notion that a state with Texas' exponential growth can get by without raising taxes. Because Perry so frequently threatened vetoes - dooming even a proposal for a local option gas tax to be approved by voters - the Texas Legislature has increasingly turned to bonds to pay for highway construction.

\$2 billion debt service

But, as Stagner says, we all know there is no such thing as a free lunch. Those bonds will cost us \$2 billion in debt service in the next budget cycle, about half the total revenue produced by the state's gas tax. Perry and his anti-tax guru Grover Norquist were flat wrong when they claimed that lawmakers advocating tax increases were acting irresponsibly. It would have been more fiscally prudent to dedicate a tax increase to pay for our roads as we built them. A tax increase that is fiscally prudent? Now there's a man-bites-dog story.

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