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## Sen. Robert Nichols' idea to shift sales auto-sales tax for roads — a big deal

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By Rodger Jones/Editorial Writer

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Message to that segment of humanity interested in where Texas is going to find road-building money: [Comb through the Texas Tribune liveblog from its weekend TT Festival's transportation portion.](#)

Two nuggets to take seriously:

1) From Sen. Robert Nichols, a former transportation commissioner who could end up chairing Senate transportation, an idea to shift the motor-vehicle sales tax to highway construction over a decade, through a constitutional amendment. Quoting the TT:

While the revenue would be minimal at first, he said the Texas Department of Transportation would be able to book perhaps \$11 billion in road work very quickly because the agency would know that more money was on the way.

Also important, Rep. Larry Phillips, House transportation chair, "said he believed the House could get behind that proposal, as it would not be viewed as a tax increase."

That's golden politics: Produce money NOT through taxes. It would cause slowly building headaches for lawmakers in future sessions. But who cares about them?

2) The idea to raise the vehicle registration fee lives. Liveblog transcript says the TT's Ross Ramsey asked how a hike in the vehicle registration fee would fare in light of Gov. Perry's success in signing up lawmakers on his pledge not to raise taxes. In response, here's a quote from Rep. Drew Darby, San Angelo Republican and House transportation committee member:

"I didn't read the word fee in that compact," Rep. Darby said.

The vehicle registration fee had a head of steam the fall before last lawmaking session, when then-transportation chair Sen. Tommy Williams rolled out PowerPoints and such to show how cheap we have it in Texas. Then all of a sudden he clammed up. That may have had something to do with Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst's U.S. Senate ambitions.

Maybe Dewhurst will have the stomach for it now. On second thought, it's probably a better bet that he'd be more interested in Nichols' non-tax, non-fee option.

[Transportation lobbyists have said](#) the registration fee has been under discussion in Austin along with two other things: using Rainy Day Fund money to start a transportation revolving fund and stair-stepping a fuel tax increase for debt reduction.

Does Nichols' fiscal "cliff" comment at the TT event represent a way to soften up the beachhead for a new tax? I'd guess no, that he genuinely thinks Austin's borrowing binge for roads has reached its natural limit.

I haven't heard much chatter about using the Rainy Day Fund for transportation. Rep. Ken Paxton of McKinney, odds-on favorite to succeed Florence Shapiro in the Senate come November, told our newspaper's editorial board that he'd like to see any available RDF money used for overdue infrastructure, roads and bridges included. Not too many people singing that chorus.

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Okay, move money from here to there. So we fix there and now we are under funded here.

I guess the things sales tax pays for, like teachers, police, and fire just aren't as important as building new roads so that sprawl can continue a few more years.

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