

[Subscribe](#)

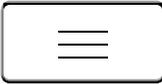
[Help](#)

77°
H: 85° L: 55°

Monday, May 13, 2013

Austin American-Statesman Real Austin. Real News.

[Sign In / Register](#)

[HOME](#) / [NEWS](#) / [TRANSPORTATION](#)

advertisement

Resize text [A](#) | [A](#) | [A](#)

Capitol quest for road cash appears dead

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Sunday, May 12, 2013

Related



Capitol quest for road cash appears dead

RODOLFO GONZALEZ

State Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo



BY [BEN WEAR](#) - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The drive to find new and sustained funding for Texas transportation projects, suffused with energy and ideas when this legislative session began in January, sputtered to a seemingly final stop late Thursday afternoon.

Along with a small but bipartisan band of allies, state Rep. Drew Darby, a San Angelo Republican, had spent an hour on the House floor pushing his House Bill 3664 to raise vehicle registration fees. But he abruptly pulled the bill down without asking for a vote many of his colleagues just didn't want to make.

"This is the last train out of Dodge to help transportation," Darby had said before the debate. Pushing a \$30-a-year fee increase in the face of gubernatorial resistance, Darby told the House, made him feel "a little like the skunk at the garden party."

His decision later to pull the bill down, while perhaps restoring him to good odor, meant that the train remains in Dodge. Legislators steeped in transportation finance said that despite the imposing \$10 billion-a-year Texas Department of Transportation budget, inaction on generating new sources of road revenue this session means that the agency will be unable to schedule any new projects after August 2015.

"We're still going to be able build roads for another 720 tomorrows," said state Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, a former House Transportation Committee chairman. "After that, it gets a little tough. It gets very tough."

One other legislative vehicle for transportation funding remains alive, Senate Joint Resolution 1, a proposed constitutional amendment carried by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, that would direct \$2.9 billion from the rainy day fund to TxDOT. The bill also would tap the \$12 billion stash for \$2 billion for water projects and \$800 million for kindergarten through 12th grade education.

Williams' measure cleared the Senate on a unanimous vote April 23. Almost three weeks later, however, the resolution has not been assigned to a House committee and is generally assumed to have reached its legislative end.

“If we do anything with (constitutional amendments), it won’t include anything but water,” House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, told reporters Thursday.

The session began with at least four significant transportation funding concepts, each of them floated by lawmakers steeped in the intricacies of paying for roads: vehicle registration fee increases, rededicating vehicle sales taxes from the general fund to TxDOT, taking rainy day money and ending the practice of using TxDOT money to fund the Texas Department of Public Safety and other nonroad costs.

Some combination of those, lawmakers said, would go a long way toward meeting TxDOT Executive Director Phil Wilson’s plea for \$4 billion more a year for general highway needs and an additional one-time appropriation of \$1.6 billion to repair or strengthen rural roads under strain from trucks servicing the state’s various oil shale plays.

In the Senate, Williams, who in the past had said raising registration fees was a good idea, focused on the rainy day approach. Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Robert Nichols, on the other hand, favored the vehicle sales tax shuffle, which could have moved to TxDOT \$3.3 billion a year (and steadily more, going forward), but also would have created a big problem paying for other state needs.

Over in the House, Darby tried to combine the registration fee increase and the elimination of the DPS “diversion,” and the sales tax switch was grafted onto his bill Thursday with an amendment shortly before Darby pulled down the legislation.

Gov. Rick Perry, meanwhile, who began the session talking about using the rainy day fund for transportation, reportedly moved toward Nichols’ sales tax idea. As Darby’s bill hung in the balance Thursday, Perry called in a series of conservative House members and urged them to vote against the bill. The ripples from those talks eventually persuaded Darby to fold his hand.

That no way was found to bridge the differences, given a generally accepted need for an infusion of highway money, is a failure of leadership, state Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, said. Perry’s leadership, he said.

“Wouldn’t it have been great for the governor to come in, with all those ideas out there, and actually broker a deal?” Watson said.

Legislators, broker thyselves, Perry’s office said.

“Texans expect their elected officials to do their job while in session and address the needs of this state,” Perry spokesman Josh Havens said in a emailed statement. “Gov. Perry has consistently worked with leadership and the Legislature this entire session.”

Part of the challenge, legislators say, is that the problem remains on the horizon. TxDOT has had a robust several years of construction, fed by what will be almost \$18 billion in borrowing by 2015. The Legislature, along with citizens in a couple of constitutional amendment votes, authorized bond sales that produced

enormous increases in TxDOT spending on roads beginning in 2004.

The largest of those spikes – \$9 billion this year – is occurring just as legislators are being told more money is needed. With all those construction projects in progress, Pickett said, it can be difficult to convince rank-and-file legislators that all that money is almost gone. Starting in the 2014-15 fiscal year, TxDOT will have less than \$3 billion a year for roads, and a large percentage of that will go to maintaining existing roads rather than building new ones.

“There still is not enough understanding of how the system works by the general public, and the Legislature itself,” Pickett said.

Watson said it constitutes progress of a sort that legislators – GOP legislators – were carrying bills this session that would have increased fees for transportation. That could foretell action in the 2015 session, just months before TxDOT depletes the last of those borrowed billions.

“But it is a sad state of affairs that in Texas government we can applaud this session because at least there were bills filed and discussed that contemplated raising new revenue,” Watson said. “We should contemplate that while we’re stuck in traffic and wondering how we’re going to move our economy forward.”

All Comments (4)	Post a Comment
-------------------------	-----------------------

If you would like to post a comment please [Sign in or Register](#)

Comment(s) 1-4 of 4



stex5150

[Report](#)

I would guess that the way Governor Goodhair sees the whole TxDOT dilemma is to under fund them to the point of extinction. Then once TxDOT can no longer function it is wide open for Governor Goodhair to bring in all of his friends and TOLL every inch of roadway in the State of Texas under the guise of tolls for maintenance. TxDOT is not helping themselves because they keep accepting inflated bids for ill conceived Maintenance Contracts that do not work, case in point look at the Austin area highways that have been under a maintenance contract for the last 2 years. TxDOT also continues to accept poor quality construction and paving projects with the attitude that they are not really paying for it so it must be alright. In doing so Taxpayers are having to pay to RE repair roadways that were paved in the previous 6 months... and there are no consequences to the original contractor because that would be too expensive. This is not just an Austin area problem it happens all over the State of Texas.

1:16 a.m. May. 13, 2013

**glassbender**[Report](#)

may be if the gov would stop the corporate welfare and use the tax payed on car sales for ROADS, instead of something else, we wouldn't need roads no one use's the 'DICK perry scamway' tollroad 130 or roads to NOWHERE

7:52 a.m. May. 13, 2013

**HIUreader**[Report](#)

glass, diversions of revenue are not within the governor's jurisdiction. they are strictly legislative permutations.

what the State could do, if it wanted, is the same thing the city of austin has begun doing: inhibiting and discouraging traffic, taking lanes out, reducing or eliminating parking, all of which make it next to impossible to travel around the town. hence, austin's transportation needs are reducing. clever, no?

8:10 a.m. May. 13, 2013

**PeterStern**[Report](#)

I recommend the following collection of options that should all be used together to get Texas back on track with paying for roadways:

Ways to pay for roads

- 0 Increase the frozen gas tax from 20 cents to 30 cents
- 0 Charge a 2 cent road tax on all service invoices
- 0 Use part of the tax on tobacco, cigarettes, cigars and alcohol strictly for roads and/or charge 1 cent more as a road tax on those items
- 0 Increase sales tax half a cent to go towards road building and maintenance
- 0 Use a minimum of \$500 million of the Rainy Day Fund for roadways
- 0 Charge 1 cent for every dollar spent on a lottery ticket for roads
- 0 Charge a \$1 monthly road payment fee on every new car loan
- 0 Charge a \$1 road fee per day on a hotel or motel room
- 0 Restructure TxDOT to cut waste of Texas tax dollars
- 0 Eliminate the CTRMA to save tax dollars, since toll roads are not needed
- 0 Start paying off road debt of bonds and loan packages

0 Stop tolls and road bond packages completely; these are private roads for the elite and NOT for all Texans.

Using all of the above will provide adequate tax revenue to build and maintain our roadways WITHOUT building toll roads and/or road bond packages.

10:44 a.m. May. 13, 2013

Comment(s) 1-4 of 4

Enjoy Free Access now through June 10

Enjoy this special preview of our new subscriber-only premium website. Register your account for uninterrupted access following our preview period.

[Get Access](#)

advertisement



Manage Your Account

Order a subscription, activate your digital access, make a payment, report a delivery issue, request a vacation hold or enroll in EZ Pay. It's everything you need, 24/7.

[Get Started](#)

NEWS

[MyStatesman.com](#)

[Sign up for Newsletters](#)

[Investigations](#)

[Sign up for Mobile Alerts](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Austin360.com](#)

[News Tips](#)

[Statesman.com](#)

[Archives](#)

[PolitifactTexas](#)

[Newsroom Directory](#)

[Hookem.com](#)

[jahora s!](#)

CUSTOMER SERVICE

[Subscriber Services](#)

[Website feedback](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Technical Support](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[FAQs](#)

[Digital Products](#)

[Our Community](#)

[Get Access](#)

[Work Here](#)

MARKETPLACE

[Marketplace](#)

[Cars](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Homes/Real Estate](#)

[Advertise with Us](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

Twitter

Facebook

Pinterest

Google+

Tumblr

© 2013 [Cox Media Group](#). By using this website, you accept the terms of our [Visitor Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#), and understand your options regarding [Ad Choices](#) .