

Dallas Morning News
By Brandon Formby
October 18, 2013

Texas lawmakers lament lack of funding for roads

TxDOT will spend \$6.2 billion on new construction and maintenance this year, but its best-case funding projection for 2015 would give the agency about \$3.7 billion.

The effects of the Texas Legislature's failure to guarantee more revenue to build and maintain highways are already starting to be felt. State transportation leaders said Thursday at a symposium that their plans for new or renovated roads won't meet expected demand.

For now, the strategy is to try to keep up with current needs instead of factoring in population growth. The state's population is expected to explode in the next 50 years, putting more people on its roads.

The Texas Department of Transportation this year will spend \$6.2 billion on new construction and maintenance. The best-case funding scenario for 2015 would give the agency about \$3.7 billion. But that requires voters to approve a constitutional amendment next year.

If voters reject the amendment, the agency will have only about \$2.5 billion to spend on new projects in two years. And since that's the only amount TxDOT knows it's likely to get, that's the value of projects actively being worked on for the future.

"We can only plan to the dollars we know we have," TxDOT Executive Director Phil Wilson said.

The comments by Wilson and other state leaders came during a transportation symposium at Southern Methodist University by nonprofit news agency the Texas Tribune. The lack of long-term transportation funding was a constant theme.

State lawmakers went into this year's legislative session ready to make transportation a priority. But the regular session ended with little to show.

"Transportation is not a sexy, emotional type of issue," said Ted Houghton, chair of the Texas Transportation Commission.

Funding problems have lingered for years. Republican lawmakers are reluctant to increase the state's gas taxes or fees on car registrations.

"There are certain sources of revenue I will never be supportive of," Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving said.

As North Texas drivers know, toll roads are helping fill the void. But state legislators worry that drivers could get fed up with having to pay to drive to many places.

“We can get to fatigue point where it gets to be too much,” said Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, who chairs the Texas House Transportation Committee.

Even after Gov. Rick Perry made transportation funding a topic in three special sessions this year, legislators declined to give TxDOT the \$1.6 billion more a year it asked for. A bitter partisan war over abortion stole the limelight in the first two special sessions.

“People knew, but they were distracted by other things,” Houghton said Thursday.

In the final special session, lawmakers again failed to guarantee TxDOT any additional money. But they agreed to let voters decide if money could be diverted from a rainy day fund to build and maintain roads. That vote happens next year.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers said Thursday they support the measure. The fund’s balance in recent years has ballooned from \$405 million to an expected \$11.8 billion by the end of 2015.

Harper-Brown said opponents of the amendment are falsely saying that lawmakers want to loot the rainy day fund. The amendment wouldn’t draw money from the existing balance, but would allow lawmakers to divert new revenue to transportation.

Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, said even if the measure passes, lawmakers again will have to talk about new funding sources in the 2015 legislative session.

“This isn’t the end-all,” he said.