



# TxDOT director Phil Wilson offers support for 'infrastructure fund' to boost state highway construction

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Published: 17 February 2013 11:06 PM

Texas Department of Transportation officials once again sounded the siren last week on funding woes, reiterating at the legislative session's first transportation committee meetings that the agency needs a \$4 billion annual infusion.

And while TxDOT Executive Director Phil Wilson stopped short of discussing the myriad suggestions for boosting his agency's \$10 billion annual budget, he offered written support for one proposal making the rounds: creating a state infrastructure fund for transportation.

The idea, suggested by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and others, would involve taking \$1 billion or more from the state's rainy day fund and applying it toward an infrastructure bank that could be used to leverage transportation construction projects.

In a letter released last week, Wilson told Dewhurst and other state leaders that such a fund could "allow transportation entities to improve their credit ratings or access additional financing for needed projects." He added: "This would be especially helpful to startup toll authorities ... or tolling entities that have fully leveraged their existing system revenues."

The transportation director's letter did not specify a funding source for the bank.

Much of Wilson's testimony before the House and Senate transportation committees highlighted TxDOT's funding challenges.

The state's 20-cent-a-gallon motor fuels tax hasn't been raised since 1991. A fourth of the revenue goes to fund education, and another sizable chunk gets diverted from the highway fund to other state agencies.

Wilson said TxDOT has been helped in recent years by bond proceeds and nontraditional financing set-ups. But he said funds are drying up and that "this state is rapidly approaching the end of what was just a temporary spike in our contracting levels."

"Transportation funding that is provided in fits and starts does not substitute for a stable, long-term financing source," Wilson told House lawmakers, adding that TxDOT's funding looks especially dicey after 2015.

Lawmakers have proposed several ideas to boost TxDOT's budget: dedicating sales taxes from new and used vehicle purchases to the highway fund, ending current diversions from the fund, and raising the annual vehicle registration fee by \$50, among others.

Except for Wilson's written support for an infrastructure fund, TxDOT officials have largely avoided the funding debate, preferring to leave the details to lawmakers. But the agency hasn't been shy about describing its monetary needs.

Wilson stressed that in the future, TxDOT will need an additional \$1 billion annually for maintenance and \$3 billion annually to expand.

Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee, said he wanted to make sure his colleagues understood the stakes. "The most fundamental issue that we have is our traditional, long-term funding mechanism is basically broke," he said.

He emphasized that the state's road maintenance budget is in jeopardy and that TxDOT still has to deal with heavy debt payments.

"For the last 10 or 12 years, we've been riding on a bubble of debt to get some of these new ... projects done," said Nichols. "Now it's time to pay the piper."

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