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## Ghost of Ric Williamson could haunt hunt for Texas highway money



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Ric Williamson.

I'll explain.

Lawmakers are particularly focused on transportation as a priority this session, so that's now put at \$4 billion extra a year, for starters. And they are tossing out possibilities that underlies the effort so far.

One of the biggest ideas on the table is using up to \$2 billion from the rainy day fund to establish a pool of money to start new projects. Gov. Rick Perry has mentioned tapping the fund, and lawmakers have chewed it over in committee meetings. It's an amorphous concept, except for a few things members seem to agree on. One of them is not using it for a one-time-only source of money.

That means the new fund would make loans to help projects that could pay them back. That's a short list of toll-viable or semi-viable highways. And among the financiers of those projects would be some of the very international infrastructure builder-operators that started beating a path to Texas when the polarizing and visionary Williamson was Perry's transportation chairman.

Williamson (for recent arrivals) was the supremely confident architect of today's policy of leasing state right-of-way to private equity companies that would use their own money to build the roads, then collect tolls over decades and bank them as profits. He also helped hatch the ill-fated Trans-Texas Corridor project, ultimately labeled a greedy land grab and spiked by the governor.

The slam on both of Williamson's initiatives was that they supposedly were aimed at doing favors for Perry's corporate buddies. Williamson, who died in 2007, also had a knack for rubbing people the wrong way, a talent that stemmed from the fact that he was often a few steps ahead of everyone else. People still mention his name — sometimes through clenched teeth — in conversation about private investment in Texas roads.

Actually, were it not for the pioneering, headstrong Williamson, Dallas might not have the LBJ rebuilding project and Tarrant County wouldn't have the North Tarrant Express, both of which involve money from the Spanish giant Cintra. But that doesn't prevent his name from still pushing buttons.

So how does all this Williamson stuff bear on the question before lawmakers today?

Imagine that lawmakers come up with only piddling amounts for highways through lowering diversions from the highway fund and through higher vehicle registrations. Imagine that other efforts fall flat to find new taxes or fees.

Imagine that the only really big number left for lawmakers to debate is a couple of billion from the rainy day fund.

Well then, it's possible for critics to spin that as Rick Perry's latest attempt to shuffle off hard-earned tax dollars to his corporate friends. It would be called an urban-friendly, toll-dependent debt scheme using state dollars to prop up the profits of foreign financiers.

And Ric Williamson's name would be part of the spiel.

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