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Top federal highway chief, a native El Pasoan, urges Texas to pass texting while driving ban



By Tom Benning / Reporter

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Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez, a native Texan, urged his home state on Friday to adopt a complete ban on texting while driving, saying that the dangerous activity "ought to have some level of consequence."

"As somebody who grew up in Texas, I hope someday Texas will in fact pass the laws to restrict texting and while driving," said Mendez, who grew up in El Paso. "I know it's controversial, but from a safety standpoint, it's very, very crucial to our efforts nationwide."

Mendez called for action as he and other officials gathered in Grand Prairie to celebrate the success of the President George Bush Turnpike's western extension. The 11.5-mile North Texas Tollway Authority stretch opened in October.

Mendez highlighted the distracted driving issue — a frequent talking point of his boss, outgoing U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood — as he made broader push for safety on the nation's highways.

Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have a complete ban on texting while driving. Texas prohibits drivers younger than 18 from using handheld devices and bans all drivers from using cell phones and other devices in school zones.

But a complete texting while driving ban has proved harder to enact. Such a measure passed both the House and Senate two years ago, but the proposed ban was vetoed by Gov. Rick Perry.

State lawmakers — such as Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland — are once again pushing the texti appeal to Perry, he said he hoped this year is a success.

"Having those laws in place will help think through, 'Do I really want to do this?'" Mendez said.

As for the Bush Turnpike western extension, Mendez echoed NTTA chairman Kenneth Barr, Tex praising the project as a model of cooperation between several different agencies.

The \$535 million project benefited from a \$20 million federal grant and a \$418 million federal low Innovation Act. And without that, Mendez said, "we may not be here today."

"That shows the partnership that's so important when it comes not just to the execution, but the really funding that is necessary to create these kinds of big projects," Mendez said.

Grand Prairie Mayor Charles England and others also said the road was an example of how infrastructure improvements can fuel the economy. England detailed how the extension was already spurring major development along the corridor, and it was a point not lost on Mendez.

"When you invest in transportation — and in infrastructure overall — you create a lot of jobs," Mendez said.

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