

# TxDOT says study underestimates money spent repairing roads



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A recent report on the state of the nation's roads drew the ire of Texas transportation officials last week. The study from an anti-sprawl group found that as Texas spent far more on road expansion than maintenance, a majority of existing roads deteriorated.

Texas Department of Transportation officials took issue with the study's portrayal of its expenses. Agency spokesman Bob Kaufman said some of the group's previous findings didn't match up with figures that TxDOT maintains. But agency representatives declined to discuss the study or alleged discrepancies in detail.

"We strongly disagree with the characterization on the use of funds made in this report," Kaufman said in a written statement.

This month's report from Smart Growth America and Taxpayers for Common Sense says TxDOT spent more than four times on road expansion what it did on maintaining existing roads between 2009 and 2011. The study says of the annual \$3.4 billion that TxDOT averaged spending on expansion and maintenance, about 82 percent went toward expansion.

In a previous report, Smart Growth said the state from 2004 to 2008 spent 62 percent of its capital expenditures expanding major roads and 11 percent repairing and maintaining older ones.

But Kaufman said the agency spent less than 35 percent of its expenditures on highway expansion between 2004 and 2008.

"And that trend is continuing," he said.

A likely factor in the conflicting figures is what gets counted where. A spokesman for Smart Growth America did not return a phone call seeking comment. TxDOT officials declined to discuss how they tabulate their figures.

The study says one of the expenses that gets tabulated as an expansion is when an aging highway is reconstructed and lanes are added.

When TxDOT rebuilds roads, especially major highways, it typically adds lanes. The aim is to minimize traffic snarls by updating old lanes and adding capacity for expected growth with just one construction project.

The way TxDOT classifies projects paints the opposite picture of the Smart Growth study. For fiscal year 2013, TxDOT spent \$3.1 billion maintaining and fixing existing roads and \$2.2 billion building new ones.

Smart Growth and Taxpayers see a national problem brewing. They say that transportation departments across the country spent \$20.4 billion annually expanding and \$16.5 billion on repairs.

The study says more money toward repairs would cut in half the number of roads in poor condition.

Texas officials have acknowledged difficulty in keeping up with repairs on state-owned roads, especially in rural areas. Damage to the roads is often attributed to the heavy trucks and equipment that are part and parcel of the state's current energy boom.

TxDOT has long asked legislators for more funding. Voters in November will decide whether to divert money from the state's robust rainy day fund to TxDOT.

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