



## James Oberwetter and David Corrigan: Legislators, keep North Texas transportation moving

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Everything is bigger in Texas — including population growth. It's no secret that Texas is growing. The state has added new residents at a rate of about 1,200 people per day for the past decade, and with growth comes a need for public investment.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and House Speaker Joe Straus all identified transportation funding as a front-burner issue for state legislators during the beginning of this session. There is growing consensus that Texas needs long-term, sustainable funding for its 80,000-mile highway system. Real problems lie ahead if actions are not taken.

Our current program is hamstrung by debt and is falling behind in delivering needed mobility. Texas hasn't raised its 20-cent gas tax since 1991. To no surprise, revenue has failed to keep up with needs due to inflation and increasingly efficient cars.

Funding has fallen short since about 2001, and the state has been forced to borrow money to make up shortfalls. Texas now owes roughly \$18 billion in accumulated debt for highway building; \$24 billion if you count debts on state-owned toll roads. The credit limit has been reached, and the highway program will be curtailed if new funding is not found now. This will have a dramatic impact on North Texas, cutting new roadway funding by 75 percent by 2017.

The Dallas Regional Chamber is in the business of economic development. We actively recruit national and international companies, speaking with them about what North Texas has to offer. We have yet to meet a prospect that didn't ask in detail about two things: labor force and transportation.

On the transportation topic, we are asked about global access and freight issues, but we're mostly judged on ease of movement. Commute patterns are scrutinized, and it boils down to traffic. Companies want to know about drive times. Quality-of-life issues related to mobility, such as making a kid's soccer game on a workday afternoon, always bubble to the top.

The North Texas region has made significant headway on mobility in the last decade because of our road and transit investments. The Texas Transportation Institute U.S. Mobility Report shows Dallas-Fort Worth doing better than Houston in taming congestion. Our average congestion-delay trend line is down, and the most recent years on record, 2009 through 2011, show D-FW has 10-15 percent fewer hours of congestion delay than Houston. We need to keep this momentum going.

In February of this year, TxDOT executive director Phil Wilson reported the agency has a shortfall of around \$4 billion a year. The chamber sees this \$4 billion-a-year-funding need as the right target for this Legislature. The Legislature has bills under consideration that fund at this level, such as HB 3157, which calls for multiple funding sources. Other bills could be combined to meet this investment level; bills like HB 479, which captures growth in the automobile sales tax; HB 3664, which increases vehicle registration fees; and HB 3666, which authorizes a fee on vehicle inspections dedicated to Department of Public Safety funding. Other bills like Senate Joint Resolution 1 provide short-term help by transferring surplus money from the state's Economic Stabilization Fund to pay for mobility.

The Dallas Regional Chamber is asking area legislators to act now to create a \$4 billion-a-year sustainable highway funding package for Texas. This investment will meet real regional and statewide needs and help keep the North Texas economy strong and growing. With this kind of investment, new and old Texans alike can keep our roads on the list of things bigger and better in Texas.

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