



Editorial: Don't raid the state's clean air fund

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We're not quite sure what part of "dedicated clean air funds" state budget makers don't comprehend, but once again some want to raid this cash box for other purposes.

Austin's latest assault is HB 7, currently in the House Appropriations Committee. Sponsored by state Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo, the bill would divert about \$100 million from the Texas Emissions Reduction Plan to patch a gaping hole in the state's highway construction fund.

A dishonest bait-and-switch budget gimmick, the diversion would be a disservice to taxpayers. It also would dangerously undercut one of the state's most effective air quality initiatives. Since its creation in 2001, the emissions program has used money collected from vehicle title and other fees to subsidize truckers and other operators in replacing older, nitrogen oxide-spewing diesel engines that contribute to ground-level ozone. Without financial help, many diesel operators likely would keep dirty engines spewing for years, significantly worsening ozone and other pollution-related health problems all across Texas.

Why mess with success? Over the past decade, the program has helped retire more than 14,700 diesel vehicles and pieces of equipment, resulting in the elimination of nearly 165,000 tons of nitrogen oxides, including more than 64.4 tons per day last year. It's not as though the state's ozone problem is solved. The D-FW area remains in violation of federal clean air standards, and other major population centers like Houston and San Antonio face emissions challenges that these funds could help allay.

And it's not as though the \$100 million would do much for highways. It's not enough to fund even a highway interchange, let alone make a dent in the state's massive transportation needs.

It *is* enough, however, to make a difference in air quality, an economic-development and public-health battle from which the state mustn't retreat. About a quarter of North Texas' ozone problems stem from diesel engines used in hydraulic fracturing and for other off-road industrial purposes. All of this cries out for more money for this clean air program, not less.

Texas has a serious highway funding problem that it must address. Trading air quality funds for new highway construction is an unacceptable exchange.

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