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Money bills for highways up for hearing this week



By Rodger Jones/Editorial Writer
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Representatives of the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition are focused this week on hearings for key money bills in a House Appropriations subcommittee chaired by Denton's Myra Crownover.

Taken together, these are worth billions a year for transportation.

The biggest change in funding approach would be an updated version of Rep. Linda Harper-Brown's HB 479, which would dedicate proceeds from the tax on vehicle sales to the highway fund. A companion in the Senate, SB 287 by Sen. Robert Nichols, would, as originally filed, have migrated all of the proceeds to the highway fund over time.

The proposals have been tempered, though, because budget writers didn't like the huge hole the bills created in the general fund. The tax now raises about \$3.3 billion a year, and the scaled-back proposals by bill authors would leave \$2.5 billion of that in the general fund in each budget year starting in fiscal 2015, according to Rider Scott, executive director of the DRMC. That means the highway fund would initially get \$800 million a year and any growth in the future. (See a [Texas Tribune video](#) of Nichols and Rep. Larry Phillips talking about the tax.)

The bills would satisfy criteria set by transportation advocates that new revenue sources must be able to grow with inflation and not be dependent on a particular fuel.

Other key bills to be heard by Crownover's panel Wednesday morning:

- HB 3664, by Drew Darby, increasing motor vehicle registration by an average of \$30 a year, raising \$600 million to \$700 million a year.
- HB 3666, by Darby, creating a new "public safety fee" to be tacked on to the cost of the annual vehicle inspection, raising \$300 million a year. That money would go into the general fund for DPS, and a like amount of money now diverted from Fund 6 to GR would no longer be diverted.

The question for GOP House members is whether a fee is a tax, for purposes of having to defend a vote in the party primary. Usually the right wing of the party considers them one and the same for political purposes. House members will need to know whether Gov. Rick Perry will provide them cover and put up his veto pen on new or higher fees.

The House is key for transportation funding this session. Senate members have sent over revenue bills, but the House has the lead, so the tenor of Wednesday's hearing is...

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