

Roads alone won't drive Texas' future, new TxDOT chief says



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The Texas Department of Transportation's new executive director says it's going to take more than new roads to keep Texans traveling smoothly if population growth estimates prove true.

The way Joe Weber sees it, the state transportation agency needs to increase financing for commuter and freight projects if it is to build the infrastructure that Texans are going to want and need in the decades ahead.

"That's going to be hard to do," Weber said. "That's a cultural change."

Some estimates project the state could double its population to more than 55 million residents in less than 40 years. TxDOT faces inadequate funding to maintain current state roads and build new highways to keep pace.

But one of Weber's biggest priorities in the short term is going to be reducing the number of traffic fatalities. More than 1,100 people have died in vehicle accidents so far this year.

"That's embarrassing to me," Weber said.

The Texas Transportation Commission tapped Weber last month to replace former executive director Phil Wilson, who left to run a Texas water authority. Weber, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general, last week spoke with *The Dallas Morning News* about his philosophies on the future of Texas transportation.

Weber was most recently the vice president of student affairs at Texas A&M, his alma mater. Like Wilson, Weber is not an engineer and doesn't have a transportation-focused background.

But, he said, his 36-year tenure in the Marines included overseeing a host of construction work, military base installations and infrastructure projects.

"So it's not new to me," he said.

Weber said that meeting transportation needs isn't just about making sure Texans get to work. He said the future stability of the state's economy will rely on businesses, workers and consumers being able to connect through all modes of transport.

"It's about economic development," he said. "It's not just moving around, it's not just solely congestion."

Putting more emphasis on transportation modes other than roads isn't just predicated on a shift in thinking — it's going to require a change in how the agency spends its money. TxDOT, like most of its counterparts across the country, was born out of a former state highway department. And when it comes to legislative funding and agency spending, those roots are still apparent.

"Funding still primarily revolves around highway construction," said agency spokesman Bob Kaufman.

Weber said the agency needs to work closely with local authorities — including other transportation agencies — to better plan for future needs and projects. He said the agency will have to continue to explore new ways to finance projects. And emerging technologies such as automated cars could also lead to innovations that relieve congestion in less costly ways to the agency.

"We're really in a window of opportunity," Weber said.

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