



Editorial: Texas highway funding gets crumbs in budget deal

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The 2013 lawmaking session was supposed to be different. Gov. Rick Perry, House Speaker Joe Straus and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst said early and often that paying for transportation needs would be a priority. They all but swore that the days of kicking that can down the road were over.

So what's that ear-splitting clatter coming from Austin all over again?

It's a replay of a tired old scenario in the Capitol, on highway money. Budget writers have hatched a deal that takes care of some basics, but — save last-minute magic — transportation won't be one of them.

From the perspective of North Texas — where we're adding about 100,000 residents a year, or 275 a day — it's a major disappointment that lawmakers buckled under a veto threat from the governor and ducked paying the cost of a modern roadway system.

It wasn't for lack of ideas or lack of clarity on what to shoot for.

Early on, lawmakers pressed Texas Department of Transportation chief Phil Wilson for a dollar figure for keeping pace with highway needs. Wilson told them it would take at least \$4 billion extra each year — \$3 billion to add highway capacity and \$1 billion for repairing existing roads.

Here's how badly lawmakers fell short: The budget deal announced last week would put \$900 million into roadways over the next two years, \$500 million of which would go to projects in the oil patch, where trucks are taking a heavy toll. That leaves \$400 million in new money — about the cost of two freeway interchanges — to be spread around statewide for non-oilfield projects.

Lawmakers in both houses started the session brimming with proposals, filing more than 75 bills to raise new money.

The closest they came to achieving something was House debate on a bill to increase vehicle registration by \$30 a year, the first general boost in registration fees since 1985. Facing a veto threat by Perry, the bill author cut the proposed increase in half, to \$15 a year — \$1.25 a month — and got House support to tap a portion of motor-vehicle sales taxes in the future. But the \$15 registration fee was still too much for Perry, who had laid down a no-new-taxes marker for the session, and the whole proposal died before a vote.

Dewhurst and Straus bear responsibility, too, for letting the imperative of highway funding drift off like some second-tier goal. Coordination and leadership went AWOL on this issue, and the state's top leaders appear content to have it settled through brinksmanship.

Perry may have won the showdown over a measly \$1.25 a month, but that essentially drags the state into the do-nothing category on paying the price of modern highways. The governor would prefer to move money around and dish some of it out to highways, then call that progress. It's not, and lawmakers know it.

By the numbers

\$4 billion — extra money needed every year for highway improvements (\$3 billion for capacity, \$1 billion for maintenance)

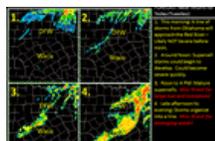
\$500 million — extra money budget negotiators approved over the next two years for oilfield roads

\$400 million — extra money approved for the rest of the state

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 **JudgeFowler** 3 hours ago

The \$500 million for oilfield roads is better characterized as paying for some of the damages to the county-maintained road system by unprecedented weight and volume of trucks needed to drill and develop the shale plays. Production from DeWitt County produced at least \$200 million in severance taxes last year with \$150 million going into the so-called "rainy day fund." Last year, the State of Texas provided less than \$125,000 in revenue for our road need with most funds coming from overweight truck fees. We need \$20-30 million annually to repair the ongoing damages. More here: <http://www.county.org/magazine/features/Pages/April%202013/The-Poor-Roads-of-the-Oil-boom.aspx>

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 **Larry Parker** 3 hours ago

Texas used to have one of the best highway systems in the world...That no longer seems to be the case.

+1

 **Michael Amonett** 4 hours ago

Perry would rather his buddies get rich building tollroads than do the right thing. What's infuriating is how disproportionate those toll fees are on those who can least afford them. What's disgusting is projects like the new LBJ where those with means will be guaranteed a 50mph speed in a lane built just for them where the toll will change from moment to moment as they look down at the poor stuck in traffic. What's even more disgusting is how NTTA will take their tolls, late fees and law suit profits and pour them down the Trinity River on the boondoggle Trinity Toll Road; a useless outrageously expensive, impractical construction project funded by the citizens of Dallas so people can get from Irving to Kaufman bypassing our fair city which you guys at the DMN advocate.

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