



# D-FW area transportation officials got much of what they wanted from Legislature

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AUSTIN — While highway funding didn't receive the sizable boost from the Legislature that many were hoping for this year, North Texas transportation officials are nonetheless celebrating success on several local initiatives.

From new tools to track down toll scofflaws to more options for Dallas-Fort Worth transit agencies to more opportunities to pursue public-private partnerships on road construction, area planners crossed off much from their legislative wish lists.

But there were failures along the way.

A bill needed to jumpstart the Cotton Belt commuter rail project never gained traction. And the region's program to offer vouchers for repair or replacement of older, polluting vehicles didn't get its funding restored.

But on the whole, North Texas transportation leaders said they were happy with the Legislature.

"In my perfect world, gosh yeah, I would love to get more funding for transit," said Gary Thomas, president of Dallas Area Rapid Transit. "But in my realistic world, things worked out generally OK."

Among the actions:

The North Texas Tollway Authority could soon be able to block the vehicle registrations of deadbeats and ban the worst toll runners from its roadways.

The measure would allow NTTA to deem a driver a "habitual violator" for accumulating 100 or more unpaid tolls and then start using the new enforcement tools. A driver who violated a roadway ban would be subject to a misdemeanor charge.

The bill will go into effect immediately, pending Gov. Rick Perry's signature. But the bill also includes a 90-day grace period for violators to settle up their accounts.

## Public-private

As road funding gets scarcer, public-private partnerships for highway construction are becoming even more important.

North Texas has been ahead of the curve on so-called comprehensive development agreements, which typically involve some form of tolled managed lanes. The biggest such project going up in the region is the LBJ Express in North Dallas.

Officials are poised to have the ability to pursue such partnerships on State Highway 183, Loop 12 and State Highway 114 in Irving; the North Tarrant Express; Interstate 35E and U.S. Highway 67 in southern Dallas; and Loop 9 in southern Dallas County.

"We got exactly what we wanted," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

## Cotton Belt project

A plan to accelerate the development of a 62-mile commuter rail corridor from Plano to Fort Worth was perhaps a bit too ambitious for this legislative session.

A bill filed to help govern the project and create a special district that could levy taxes went nowhere. Not all the impacted cities were on the same page, although Fort Worth is continuing its separate effort to build the line's western portion.

"It's back to the drawing board," said Sen. John Carona, the Dallas Republican who offered the bill.

Planners praised the effort, however, for starting a conversation about innovative ways to finance rail projects and said that new ideas will likely emerge from the effort.

## DART and natural gas

A bill to restructure how Texas collects taxes on compressed natural gas would've cost DART about \$1 million annually as the agency switches its entire bus fleet over to the fuel source.

But DART persuaded lawmakers to amend the bill to exempt transit agencies from switching to a pay-as-you-go system from a flat fee setup. That change upset some lawmakers, even as DART officials praised the benefit for customers.

"It's not us so much, as it is the folks who pay the sales tax to fund us," said Thomas, the DART president. "It really boils down to service on the street."

## Vehicle inspections

Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, led a successful effort to streamline vehicle registrations and inspections, much to the delight of the Council of Governments and other North Texas officials.

The measure, pending final approval, would require Texas drivers to get their vehicles inspected before they could get their annual registration. But motorists would no longer have to display a separate inspection sticker on their windshield.

West said he hoped the bill would help reduce fraud and also make the task less of a hassle for drivers.

"We should take advantage of the technology that's available, in order to realistically just have one sticker," he said.

## AirCheckTexas

The Council of Governments pushed hard for full funding of the AirCheckTexas Drive a Clean Machine Program, which has helped to repair or replace polluting vehicles.

The program's budget had been \$25 million but was cut by 87.5 percent last year. And though Morris, the council's transportation director, said lawmakers seemed to understand his concerns, no funding was added back.

## More transit options

The Denton County Transportation Authority is slated to receive permission to create local government corporations so it can better partner with DART and the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, known as The T.

DART officials also cheered a bill that would make it easier for them — or any transit agency — to bring in new members from neighboring counties. It would allow Arlington, for instance, to join DART if it wanted, even though the city is in Tarrant County.

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