



Future Texas highway projects in doubt as Legislature's push for new funds fizzles

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AUSTIN — An effort to boost transportation funding in Texas this year turned into a road to nowhere, as lawmakers wrapped up without addressing the state's highway needs in any substantial way.

North Texas drivers largely won't notice the impact right away, as \$16 billion of road work is underway in the region and will stay on track. But future projects to ease congestion are now in jeopardy.

The Texas Department of Transportation got virtually none of the \$4 billion more a year it says it needs. And long-planned improvements to Interstate 35E in Oak Cliff, the eastern part of LBJ Freeway and other major roads might not come to fruition.

"If roads can't be built, they're just not going to be built," said Bill Meadows, a Fort Worth businessman who recently served on the Texas Transportation Commission.

Texas' transportation funding crunch stems in part from the fact that the state's 20-cents-a-gallon motor fuels tax hasn't been increased since 1991.

A fourth of the revenue goes to fund education; another sizable chunk gets diverted from the highway fund to other state agencies. Inflation, higher construction costs and improved vehicle fuel efficiency have also reduced TxDOT's purchasing power.

To keep pace with the state's booming population growth, transportation planners have turned to nontraditional methods such as debt financing, toll roads and public-private partnerships.

But the department's credit cards are almost maxed out. Lawmakers said they recognized the need, but managed to get the agency just \$400 million in gas tax revenue that has been diverted to the Department of Public Safety and another \$450 million to repair roads damaged by traffic related to oil and gas drilling.

More ambitious proposals fell by the wayside, as lawmakers focused more on water infrastructure, education and the broader budget battle.

Ideas considered

An early favorite was a proposal to dedicate a portion of vehicle sales tax revenue to transportation.

The idea would have eventually provided the department with billions of dollars each year and allowed the agency to pay down its debt. It appealed to Gov. Rick Perry and other officials because it would have made use of revenue that's already in the budget.

The proposal, though, would have left a hole in the general revenue fund that some lawmakers feared would become a chasm within a decade.

Another option was to increase the annual vehicle registration fee — last upped in 1985 — by anywhere from \$15 to \$50.

That idea received backing from the influential Texas Association of Business. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo, argued that getting back to a pay-as-you-go system was more fiscally conservative than relying on more debt. But Perry signaled his distaste for a fee increase.

One more possibility emerged in the session's final days, as Senate leaders proposed taking half the future dollars reserved for the state's rainy day fund and dedicating them to highways. It would have meant about \$1 billion a year.

But House leaders balked at the proposal, perhaps because the fund is already being tapped for other purposes. And with the session ending, there wasn't time to work out a compromise.

Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Robert Nichols said, however, that lawmakers were intrigued by the idea of giving TxDOT a significant infusion without

raising fees or taxes, taking money away from something else or busting the state Constitution's spending cap.

"It's something that will come up the next time we're in session," said Nichols, R-Jacksonville.

Why optimism fizzled

Lawmakers struggled to pinpoint the main reason early optimism about finding new money for roads fizzled.

Some said the fact that the Legislature's top transportation minds couldn't settle on a favored approach made it hard to rally support.

Others pointed out that transportation was competing this session with water for infrastructure funds. The state's growth and drought have made funding new water projects an urgent priority.

But the extended timeline in building roads makes it seem like there's not a problem, officials said. With so many road projects going on, Darby echoed others in saying the state has "cone fatigue."

"This Legislature seems to act more responsibly when there's a crisis," he said.

Still others said it was difficult to move the large group of first- and second-term lawmakers — many of them tea party adherents — past the sticker shock of the proposed fixes.

But Rep. Scott Turner, a freshman Republican from Frisco, rolled his eyes at that critique, saying he supported "common-sense" ideas like the vehicle sales tax proposal.

"We live in the same state that whoever made those criticisms live in," he said. "So we understand the urgency as they understand it."

It will only continue in coming years, especially in car-choked locales like North Texas.

Projects already up and running — such as the LBJ Express in North Dallas or the Horseshoe redo of Interstates 30 and 35E in downtown Dallas — will finish as expected. But after that, the state will probably forgo expansions meant to accommodate more traffic, focusing instead on maintenance.

North Texas transportation planners have been a bit more creative than those in other regions in leveraging state funds to use toll roads, tolled managed lanes and public-private partnerships.

Michael Morris, transportation director at the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said those efforts will be redoubled. To keep congestion manageable, he said, officials will also have to look more at things like land-use policies and smarter traffic management.

But he and Meadows, the former transportation commissioner, said it still requires some kind of initial investment.

"You talk about leveraging public dollars, but the fundamental there is that there have to be some dollars to be leveraged," Meadows said. "You open the toolbox and the tools are still there, but the nails are gone."

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The more roads you build, the more congestion you create, at least if they're free to use. Look up "induced demand" to learn the little secret traffic engineers have known for decades but know is politically impossible to utter in public.

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1DaIM 1 day ago

There is only one truly fair fix to this. We are going to have to toll the "freeways". The drivers that use them should pay for them. Repeal the gas tax and apply the standard sales 8% sales tax we pay for everything else, and then charge tolls for those that insist on living in suburban welfare cities like Plano and McKinney.

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