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It's down to a few precious hours on major transportation funding in Texas



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Today is the Texas House's deadline for distributing a calendar for floor action on House bills. If the Calendars Committee fails to put out HB 3664 today, a major new funding mechanism for highways will probably bite the dust for this session.

The bill would raise registration fees on motor vehicles by \$30 a year. That would raise about \$700 million toward the \$4 billion annual needs shortfall identified by TxDOT to maintain and expand the highway system.

Transportation lobbyists say they have been counting votes for the bill and believe they have enough commitments of support. At the same time, there is the possibility that some of these "supporters" are privately telling Speaker Joe Straus that they don't want to vote on a fee increase and would be grateful if the bill died in Calendars.

For the tea party, a fee increase is no different than a tax increase, and supporting one could be political suicide for some GOP members.

Many Republicans fear the wrath from the tea party right more than they value support from the business community, and Texas business has been nothing if not foursquare behind better funding of roads. Let the transportation system crumble under the stampede of new Texans, and the Texas miracle evaporates.

Gov. Rick Perry has not openly given members cover on a fee increase the way he did last month in coming out in support of a proposal to shift the growth in future motor-vehicle sales tax receipts to highways. The lack of clear cover from the governor chills support for HB 3664.

The irony is that the sales-tax shift appears dead, too, even though the governor gave cover. It could end up tacked onto another bill as an amendment, and the registration fee bill would be one option. But if the registration bill doesn't come out of Calendars, that may be the final nail for the sales-tax bill.

Of course, there's also SJR 1 — that legislation to take rainy day money and create new water, transportation and education funds. But Straus says he hates it, and the House may not even take a vote on it.

If all these dire scenarios come to pass on better highway funding, lawmakers deserve the special session that Perry has warned them about.

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