



Editorial: Day of reckoning on Texas highways

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The test comes today on whether Texas House members really want to address the state's transportation needs or whether they're content to give the problems mere lip service.

Up for consideration is a bill (HB 3664) to boost annual registration fees on passenger vehicles by \$30. Voting for the measure is the responsible thing to do, considering evidence that the state's roadway system is overburdened and underfunded.

Raising costs on the public clearly is a tough vote for lawmakers, especially conservative Republicans who might feel the wrath of tea party activists come next year's primary elections. But in the tension between responsible governing and political self-interest, there's no contest with this vote.

Lawmakers have been dodging their responsibility for too long. The state's motor fuels tax was last raised 22 years ago, in 1991. Texas has since added more than 9 million people — plus their cars and trucks. As cars get more efficient, the tax is not paying the freight, but lawmakers have refused to touch it. Instead, they have hatched various debt schemes to build highways — as though the borrowed billions don't have to be paid back — and pushed metro areas to slap tolls on more and more roads.

The scheming should stop, and the House should own up to the cost of being a high-growth state that prides itself as a great place to do business. Texas won't remain that business haven for long if state leaders are ambivalent about a modern highway system.

The proposed boost in registration fees would raise about \$700 million annually, just a fraction of the additional \$4 billion that TxDOT estimates it needs each year to keep up with highway construction and maintenance. The money's a start, though. Some lawmakers want to add another revenue provision to the bill, a proposal by Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving, to tap a portion of motor vehicle sales taxes in the future. That merits support, too, since it would capture growth in a tax already paid by road users.

There's a role for Gov. Rick Perry before the House considers these key votes. Perry has already endorsed the concept of drawing on vehicle sales taxes, but he's been mum on whether higher vehicle registration fees would violate his no-new-taxes pledge and cause him to veto the measure.

For many Republicans in the House, political cover from Perry is a precondition to voting yes. The governor should provide it.

Perry has been the state's most vocal cheerleader about our business climate, taking that message across the continent. The governor tells business executives that it's worth it for their companies to uproot and make the investment to start anew in Texas.

If Perry helps the highway bill clear the Legislature, he could tell those same executives that Texas is investing, too, in a first-class highway system years into the future.

It's what a destination state ought to be doing.

How Texas compares

State	Total taxes, fees*	State rank
Arkansas	\$361.08	12
California	\$353.53	14
New York	\$237.07	29
Illinois	\$198.13	34

Oklahoma	\$181.20	40
Texas	\$167.10	44
Florida	\$152.14	48
Louisiana	\$120.35	50

*Combines registration costs, property taxes and other fees for 2008 Ford Taurus driven 12,000 miles.

The annual Texas registration fee is now \$50.75 for cars and trucks 6,000 pounds or less, and Dallas and many other counties add \$10. The state motor fuels tax is 20 cents a gallon in Texas.

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richard schumacher 13 hours ago

We don't get what we don't pay for. Increase the gas tax to \$0.50 per gallon and index it to inflation.

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JulieB 11 hours ago

First, the state needs to stop the diversions from the gas tax. Apparently those bills have died in committee. And, apparently, this is one thing I agree with tea party folks on. Spend the gas tax on roads and transportation infrastructure. Don't send it off to pet projects. Get that fixed first, THEN talk about the tax rate.

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Greg Davis 55 minutes ago

Exactly. Stop diverting the revenue that was originally set aside for roads before you talk about increasing taxes. If roads are a priority, prioritize the gas tax revenue that you already have.

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