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FORECAST

TRAFFIC

Texas Senate approves modest boost to highway funding, but prospects in House uncertain



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Published: 18 June 2013 11:12 PM

Updated: 19 June 2013 12:39 AM

AUSTIN — The Senate tentatively approved a transportation-funding measure Tuesday that even proponents said would be just a small step toward solving Texas' traffic congestion woes.

By a voice vote, senators advanced a constitutional amendment that would take half of the future money reserved for the state's rainy day fund and dedicate it to highways.

Final Senate approval was delayed by an abortion debate late Tuesday. And the road funding measure's prospects of getting through the House and onto the November ballot for voters' approval were uncertain. The special session must end by next Tuesday.

In the regular session, lawmakers funded schools and water but shorted highways. Last week, Gov. Rick Perry gave them a chance for a do-over in the special session.

But Perry's resistance to higher gasoline taxes and vehicle registration fees has left lawmakers few choices — other than rearranging bits of current revenue.

Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, proposed taking half of the energy-production tax money that now goes into the state's rainy day fund and devoting it to roads.

The state faces a road-financing crisis, he said. If voters approve the amendment, it would pour an additional \$900 million a year into highways starting in November 2014, Nichols said.

"Funding for congestion relief will be at a 10-year low in two short years," he said, adding that waiting until the 2015 session to act "will be too late."

Sen. Kevin Eltife, a Tyler Republican who has called for raising taxes for transportation, noted that highway officials say they need an additional \$4 billion a year just to maintain current conditions.

"As politicians, we don't need to run around thumping our chests that we fixed the transportation problem, because this is just about 20 percent of the problem," he said.

Nichols responded: "That's a very fair assessment."

Three GOP senators squabbled over the wisdom of a provision that would move the additional money from oil and gas production taxes into roads only if the rainy day fund has a balance of \$6 billion or more.

Sen. Dan Patrick of Houston, called the provision a must. Otherwise, staunch conservatives may not vote for the amendment this fall, he said.

Sens. Tommy Williams of The Woodlands and Robert Duncan of Lubbock countered that the provision could complicate budget writers' task if it creates a perception that lawmakers can't ever draw the fund balance below \$6 billion.

Nichols said that's not his intention and that lawmakers would retain their current ability to spend rainy day dollars.

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