



Editorial: Still a chance for Perry to address transportation flub



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Topping the list of flubs from the 2013 Legislature is transportation funding. The dropped ball has Gov. Rick Perry's fingerprints all over it, but it's not too late to make some kind of gain.

A grand bargain that plugs the entire \$4 billion-a-year hole identified by TxDOT is not going to happen in the current special session — or maybe ever, as long as Perry occupies the governor's office. He has been just that stubborn about embracing truly new money.

Still, lawmakers could make progress on the state's highway needs, and Perry needs to show leadership for that to happen. The problem just gets worse if the Legislature goes home and leaves the subject on the table until 2015.

To recap: Despite consensus that road funding would be a 2013 priority, only one new-money measure was scheduled for a floor vote, and members chickened out before it could be taken. The proposal (HB 3664) would have raised vehicle registration fees the equivalent of \$1.25 a month while dedicating a portion of future vehicle sales taxes to highways.

But "forces working outside of this chamber" caused the bill's author, San Angelo Republican Rep. Drew Darby, to pull it back before a vote. He was referring to Perry's veto threat and pronouncement that raising fees is tantamount to raising taxes. That poisoned the bill for Republicans, who fear being caught left of Perry.

What's confounding about the governor is how he thinks the state's core needs can be addressed responsibly if he forecloses on fresh revenue. That forces lawmakers to continue down the road of tolls and debt. How so?

One bill (SB 1730) that passed the Legislature last month and awaits Perry's signature would expand the list of North Texas expressways that could be built by partnering with private investors who would get long-term tolling rights. Since those investors can bring borrowed money to the table, that puts more debt into play, with toll-paying drivers on the hook for paying it off.

Signing this bill and declaring victory wouldn't pass the test of conservative leadership.

One new idea for highway financing has been advanced by two Senate leaders — the budget chairman, Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, and the transportation chairman, Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville. The measure (SJR 2) would let Texans vote on redividing the tax on oil and gas that goes into the rainy day fund and using part of it for road building.

It wouldn't be truly new revenue — just cash shifted from bucket to bucket — and would take a few years to approach \$1 billion for highways. But governing is all about making the best of imperfect solutions.

In order for SJR 2 or other road funding ideas to get serious debate, Perry needs to open up the special session to transportation. The job is undone. This time the governor needs to be part of the solution and not pick at the ideas of others from the sidelines.

By the numbers

\$4 billion — extra money needed each year to keep pace with highway maintenance and expansion needs

\$400 million — extra money provided by lawmakers to be shared statewide, about the cost of two freeway interchanges

\$450 million — extra money dedicated just to roads degraded by oil and gas drilling

\$932 million — extra money that would be generated for roads in fiscal 2016 through the proposed SJR 2, which would tap oil and gas taxes

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David Lethe 2 hours ago

Every day the DMN comes up with additional ways to separate Texans from our tax dollars. Water, medicare expansion, more money to subsidize colleges; cancer research; more money for hospitals; schools & teacher salaries; courthouse renovations; inspections for explosive chemicals; more legal aid for murderers on death row; global warming money; expanded aid for illegal aliens; and now road maintenance.

Texans can't possibly pay for everything this newspaper wants funded. So, editors, what programs do we cut to pay for these roads?

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Ken Duble 12 hours ago

The editorial's headline calls this a flub, but it isn't a flub. Perry is fully prepared for our transportation system to dissolve into gridlock before he'll expose himself to sniping from his right flank for raising new revenues.

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Cestos Jack 24 hours ago

Ready yourself for a replay. Perry will be blamed for everything into the next century.

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B G W 2 hours ago

Who do YOU hold responsible for doing Perry's job?

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JulieB 2 days ago

Kudos to Senators Williams and Nichols for advancing a bill that would put this issue to a vote by the citizens of Texas. Will the governor sign it if it passes?

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Paul Last 2 days ago

Will Perry sign it? Only if it will benefit him financially in some way.

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