



Editorial: Lawmakers need to get the highway deal done



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Ready, set, compromise.

That's what needs to happen in the state Capitol if Texas lawmakers want to avoid another missed opportunity to raise money for the anemic highway fund.

Let the egos fall by the wayside. Lawmakers must pick between competing House and Senate constitutional amendments that would begin to bridge the \$4 billion-a-year shortfall for road-funding needs. Neither would solve the problem, but either would be a start.

The most sellable option is probably the Senate's version, SJR 1, which passed the upper chamber unanimously. It's the simplest and could be explained in an elevator ride. With voter approval, it would take the taxes on oil and gas production that now flow into the rainy day fund and send half to the highway fund. It would also guarantee a minimum balance for the rainy day fund if oil production falls off.

Another thing going for SJR 1 is that the House passed a version of it last month, in the first special session called by Gov. Rick Perry. The House knows the ins and outs of this and mustered bipartisan support, even from tea party Republicans.

The House's proposal, passed last week, is a new arrival. With voter approval, it would take the nickel that now goes to public education from the state's 20-cent motor fuels tax and send it to the highway fund. To compensate education, it would tap rainy day revenues on energy production for the exact amount the nickel would have raised.

HJR 2 supporters had to calm nervous conservatives in the House because the legislation has no automatic provision to protect rainy day revenues if oil and gas production plummet. They had to calm nervous education advocates about changing fuel tax guarantees for schools that have stood since 1923.

To advance their idea now, House supporters would have to explain their calculus to wary Senate negotiators who thought they had a deal on the simpler version before time ran out last month. That's cause for concern, as time ticks away on this second special session, which ends July 30.

Further, the House plan raises slightly less for roadways and is tied to the stagnant motor fuels tax, which experts agree is a poor long-term bet to help sustain transportation needs. The Senate plan is tied to the robust revenue growth from the oil patch boom.

However this works out, it was nice to hear Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst announce to the Senate on Friday a delegation of senators to work directly with representatives named by House Speaker Joe Straus.

Top state leaders had set public education, water and transportation among their top meat-and-potatoes priorities for this year's Legislature. Of the three, roadway funding is the only one that hasn't been addressed. It's good to see lawmakers finally get their focus.

RIVAL HIGHWAY FUNDING PROPOSALS

From the Senate — SJR 1, a proposed constitutional amendment requiring voter approval. Passed the Senate 31-0. Would send half the state's tax on oil and gas production that now goes to the rainy day fund to the highway fund instead. The maneuver would yield \$879 million in fiscal 2015 and \$933 million the next year. A version of this legislation passed the House last month but died when time ran out on the first special session.

From the House — HJR 2, a proposed constitutional amendment requiring voter approval. Passed the House 108-25 last week. Would take the 25 percent portion of the state's 20-cent motor fuels tax that now goes to the education fund and send it to the highway fund instead. Would compensate the education fund with taxes on oil and gas production that now goes to the rainy day fund. Would raise \$820 million in fiscal 2015, growing to \$860 million a year by 2018.

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