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## Texas may shift costly upkeep of urban state highways to Dallas, other cities



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AUSTIN — State transportation officials are working on a plan to transfer maintenance of nearly 1,900 miles of state highways in urban areas onto Dallas and 58 other cities. It would force them to absorb \$165 million a year in new costs.

The Texas Transportation Commission will discuss the proposal Aug. 29. A highway bill the Legislature approved this month calls on the agency to “identify and implement savings” totaling \$100 million.

City and county officials were notified about the proposal in a letter from the state Transportation Department this week. The letter described the “tumbuck” program as an effort to “increase local control.”

The head of the Texas Municipal League scoffed at that suggestion. He called it a pass-the-buck gimmick and a massive, unfunded mandate that would increase property taxes on urban homeowners and businesses.

“This plan to abandon maintenance of state highways in 59 Texas cities is not about efficiency,” Bennett Sandlin, the group’s executive director, said Friday. “It’s just the latest gimmick by state officials to avoid responsibility for providing an adequate highway system for Texas.”

Transportation Department spokesman Bob Kaufman said many of the roadways in question were built as state farm-to-market roads. Over the years, they have evolved into local thoroughfares.

“Roads like Northwest Highway in Dallas have been maintained by the state for decades. And now it’s time to consider cities assuming the responsibility for operation and maintenance,” he said.

Sandlin noted that the additional maintenance costs for cities “would come on top of the hundreds of millions of dollars that TxDOT is already extorting from cities and counties” for new highway projects. The agency demands “local participation” on most of those projects.

He noted that cities contributed more than \$112 million in cash and much more in right-of-way donations and services for state highway construction in 2012.

Sandlin also questioned whether lawmakers intended for higher local property taxes to offset the savings they requested.

In his letter to city and county officials this week, Transportation Department Executive Director Phil Wilson said the nearly 1,900 miles of roads are state-owned but serve primarily local traffic.

Wilson cited several benefits in giving cities responsibility for the roads. They include the ability to control driveway access, speed limits, on-street parking, road closures and maintenance schedules.

Before any roads are transferred from state to local authorities, he said, the Transportation Department will ensure that they are in “satisfactory” condition.

The 59 cities all have populations of more than 50,000.

Amanda Wilson, a spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said the group’s transportation department was aware of the potential policy. But she said that neither staff members nor the Regional Transportation Council has had a chance to study it in depth.

“It would be premature to know what the impact might be,” she said.

Vic Suhm, executive director of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, said the idea is just “one more function of TxDOT’s funding dilemma.”

“They are literally out of money,” he said. “And until that issue is resolved, there are going to be things like this.”

He said that some cities — especially those that share in the department’s budget woes — probably would have trouble taking on high-dollar chunks of road maintenance.

Staff writer Tom Benning in Dallas contributed to this report.

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Throw the bums out of Austin in 2014, run Wendy run!

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**Pegaso** 3 days ago

The days of government-subsidized sprawl are coming to an end.

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**mdunlap1** 3 days ago

Please give IH-345 back to Dallas so we can tear it down.

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**David Kumpf** 3 days ago

Another TxDOT success story - - - the dimwit tea baggers will brag how they're keeping State taxes low and, given their largely suburban demographic, they also won't have to assume any of the costs transferred to their "blue" urban county residents. It's the best of both worlds for Jed Clampett and his tea party goobers.

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**richard schumacher** 3 days ago

Excellent idea. Now Margaret Hunt, Ross Perot, Jerry Jones and the rest can start filling potholes in exchange for the naming rights.

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**John Hix** 3 days ago

This is the famous Texas two step of shuffling the taxes to the local area so TPot GOP in Austin can continue to say no new taxes

7   1

  
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**Ken Peck** 3 days ago

Pay attention Texas! When your state legislature talks about how (s)he opposed state tax increases, do not be deceived. Passing infrastructure expense from the state to cities and counties will result in tax increases -- not just STATE taxes. This is a favorite shell game played by lying politicians. Maybe (s)he didn't fix the broken Texas state tax 'system.' But your county, city, school, and various special taxing districts WILL rise. In addition, because the state is cutting funding for state universities and colleges, tuition WILL rise. And, unfortunately, the result is an extremely regressive and inefficient system of financing essential state services and functions. Wake up Texas.