



Vandergriff balks at TxDOT plan to shift road maintenance costs to Dallas and other cities



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Texas Transportation Commissioner Victor Vandergriff said Wednesday that he has reservations about a transportation department proposal to transfer maintenance of nearly 1,900 miles of state highways to Dallas and other urban areas.

Vandergriff, an Arlington businessman, said he knows the Texas Department of Transportation must find ways to shore up its depleted coffers. And he said some roads would probably be better served under local controls.

But Vandergriff expressed concern that many of the cities and counties being considered just don't have the budget flexibility to absorb those roads' maintenance costs: an estimated \$165 million a year statewide.

"We're going to have a pretty robust discussion about whether this is a wise move," he said after a ribbon-cutting for the DFW Connector project in Grapevine. "For me personally, I question it."

Vandergriff and the four other state transportation commissioners are scheduled to explore the plan Aug. 29 at a meeting in Austin. No action will be taken, and TxDOT has invited city and county leaders to share their thoughts on the idea.

TxDOT notified cities and counties — in and around large, urban areas — of the cost-cutting "turnback" program in a letter last week.

In TxDOT's Dallas district — Collin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Rockwall, Kaufman and Navarro counties — the agency has identified 70 road segments that could be sent back to cities.

That nearly 265 miles of road includes 37 miles of Northwest Highway in Dallas, 11 miles of Cross Timbers Road in Flower Mound and 6 miles of Irving Boulevard in Irving.

Phil Wilson, TxDOT's executive director, reiterated Wednesday that his agency is dealing with the realities of a budget that still needs another \$3 billion a year. And that's even after the Legislature this year found TxDOT an extra \$1.2 billion annually, pending voter approval.

Wilson, also at the DFW Connector ribbon-cutting, said TxDOT started looking at roads that have evolved beyond their initial purpose. Many are state farm-to-market roads or other arterial roads that have grown into city streets that serve local traffic.

"These roads are not really about what TxDOT's historic mission has been about: connectivity from city to city," he said.

Wilson said cities could benefit in some ways from the increased local control. He said cities would have the final say over things like driveway access, speed limits and maintenance schedules.

But the Texas Municipal League has panned the plan, as has Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price. And Vandergriff's position could signal broader opposition, especially since he said he's already heard grumbling from a few other cities.

"It's been generally negative," he said.

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