



## Plan to shift costs for state roads to Texas cities pulled back amid criticism



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AUSTIN — State transportation officials backed away Thursday from a proposal to transfer responsibility for nearly 1,900 miles of state highways in Dallas and 58 other urban areas to cities and counties.

Scores of city and county officials crowded into a public hearing of the Texas Transportation Commission to voice strong opposition to the “tumbback” plan for some state roads.

The state pitched the proposal as a way to give more local control to cities and counties while saving the state \$165 million a year. But local officials attacked it as a massive unfunded mandate that would force property tax hikes across the state.

“Cities need to be partners with state government, not its ATM machines,” said Mesquite Mayor John Monaco. He represented cities as president of the Texas Municipal League. “If this \$165 million shift is allowed to occur, we will be starting down a dark and treacherous course of underfunded state government turning to cities to pay for state services.”

Monaco also noted that most states give their cities financial aid to pay for road maintenance. Cities in Texas get nothing from the state.

Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price said local officials were shocked this month when they received a letter from the Texas Department of Transportation. The letter indicated that the state wanted to transfer maintenance of 1,900 miles of state roads to cities and counties.

“The bare-minimum estimate to maintain those roads in Fort Worth is \$11 million, a cost that Fort Worth citizens simply cannot take on right now,” she said. It would force either a property tax hike or cuts in city services, she added.

“Texas must step up to plate and take care of the state’s transportation needs,” Price said.

After the hearing ended, transportation officials indicated they would pull back.

Phil Wilson, the transportation department’s executive director, later posted a letter on the agency’s website. It said he will propose a “voluntary participation program that initially would allow cities and counties to ask to assume the responsibility for and ownership of non-freeway roadways within their jurisdiction.”

Wilson said the state would compensate them for one year’s worth of maintenance. He also said the state would spend what it saves on mobility and safety improvements in cities that take over the roadways.

But many local government officials did not appear interested in taking on more costs.

“I want you to know that if this program is not voluntary, we will fight it tooth and nail,” Victoria County Judge Donald Pozzi told the five-member transportation commission.

After testimony had concluded, Commissioner Victor Vandergriff of Arlington called the hearing a “colossal waste of time.” He also chided TxDOT officials for not gauging the reaction of local officials before moving forward.

But Ted Houghton of El Paso, chairman of the commission, said the hearing started a discussion on roadways that was overdue.

“We did the right thing. We should be doing this,” he said.

The proposal followed a highway bill in which the Legislature called on the agency to "identify and implement savings" totaling \$100 million.

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