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## Big bidness: Other states seize on Texas' inaction on roads



By Robert T. Garrett  
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Big business groups urged lawmakers Monday to get a move on and send voters a road-funding measure they claimed is vital to continued growth of Texas' economy.

"The need for additional money is as clear as can be," said Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business, the state's premier business lobby. He joked that traffic tie-ups forced one chamber of commerce executive to miss a Capitol news conference about improving roads.

State leaders haven't acted in a major way on transportation funding, despite state highway planners' plea that they need \$5 billion a year more just to maintain current levels of congestion.

Gov. Rick Perry, who has helped block serious consideration of gasoline tax increases and higher vehicle registration fees, nevertheless has summoned lawmakers into a third special session. The Republican governor has asked them to rearrange some existing revenues, so roads will get more.

Hammond said state inaction on roads and water supplies has begun to harm economic development efforts.

"We know that other states ... are using this against us: 'Don't go to Texas. They don't have water and they don't have roads,'" he said.

Leaders of the Texas Association of Manufacturers, Transportation Advocates of Texas and Metro 8 Chambers of Commerce of Texas joined Hammond in urging lawmakers to pass a constitutional amendment for the November 2014 election. It would dedicate half of future rainy day fund revenues to non-toll roads and other transportation improvements.

Hammond said a fear of being accused of raising taxes has complicated Big Business' push for more road funding.

"It is absolutely a problem in Texas today because there are those out there right now who are saying that these goals can be accomplished without additional funding," he said. "And that's simply not true."

Still, Hammond took pains to say the transportation-funding problem can be fixed with higher fees, not tax hikes. And the proposal before lawmakers is neither, he said.

"What we're talking about this afternoon is not a tax increase," he said. "It's simply allocating some of the additional funds that are coming in as a result of the oil and gas boom in Texas."

The severance taxes otherwise would go into the rainy day fund. Under lawmakers' spending decisions this year, the fund over the next two years would never dip below \$6.5 billion, even if half of the future deposits is siphoned off to transportation and voters this fall approve spending \$2 billion to launch a revolving loan fund for water projects.

Asked if lawmakers eventually would have to raise taxes to solve the state's road-financing shortfall, Hammond replied, "Well, we never said taxes. We talked about something called fees. ... We're for fees, not that other word that will go unmentioned."

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