



Editorial: How big a deal is the new highway-funding plan?



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How big a deal is the Legislature's passage of a highway-funding package this week? Somewhere between a mountain and a molehill, depending on which lens you choose to see it through.

Through the political lens, it was a masterful combination of shuttle diplomacy, deal-cutting, feather-soothing and stagecraft to hatch a plan for another \$1.1 billion a year for roads, pending voter approval.

A highway-funding solution had eluded legislators over four lawmaking sessions — one regular and three specials — and 207 days. They were cranky and given to obsess over the highway plan's imperfections. Supporters had to mollify Democrats whose noses were out of joint because the plan taps the rainy day fund for concrete but not classrooms. They had to mollify tea party Republicans who get nervous about leaving political tracks that can be construed as undisciplined spending.

Ultimately, the gravity of the highway funding deficit had sunk in to enough lawmakers. On hand to root on final passage was a chorus of business voices from across the state. They were singing a familiar tune that tone-deaf lawmakers are prone to ignore: The Texas economic juggernaut will hit the wall if businesses don't have the roads to get products to market or workers to their jobs.

In this light, the road-funding plan is a big deal, one that allows lawmakers to tout a completed checklist when they hit the campaign trail next year.

Now, the molehill.

The \$1.1 billion is only a fraction of the annual shortfall that highway chiefs had outlined for lawmakers. Given 1,000 or so new Texans a day, the Texas Department of Transportation estimates it needs an extra \$4 billion a year, plus another \$1 billion to repair and harden Oil Patch roads that are being pounded into oblivion.

What does \$1.1 billion buy? Four new big freeway interchanges, maybe five. If the highway department took every penny of that money over four years, it still wouldn't cover the cost of the I-35E rebuilding project from LBJ Freeway to Denton.

In other words, that masterful job of putting a billion-dollar spending plan to voters will, at best, scrounge up a mere down payment on Texas' highway needs.

There's one provision in the highway package that could pay big dividends later. It creates select committees on steroids — nine House members and nine Senate members — and puts them to work studying the state's highway picture.

A single set of recommendations is due Nov. 1, 2014. The report will provide the next Legislature with a clear, updated look at highway underfunding and possibilities for bridging that gap. It will present revenue ideas used by other states and other nations. It will provide a fresh analysis of Texas' growing debt for highways and TxDOT's level of efficiency.

Properly done, the interim work will map out a way past molehills and help the 2015 Legislature find a sustainable way of paying the cost of modern transportation.

Provisions of highway-funding package

SJR 1, a constitutional amendment for the Nov. 4, 2014 ballot:

Asks voter permission to take half the taxes on oil and energy production that now go to the rainy day fund and place the amount in the highway fund instead.

Restricts the money from being used to finance toll roads.

Would yield an estimated \$1.1 billion a year.

HB 1, which puts the amendment into effect:

Creates a standing panel of House and Senate budget writers to protect the balance in the rainy day fund. Members would weigh the history of fund balances and transfers, along with funding demands including highway congestion.

Requires TxDOT to identify and implement \$100 million in savings and efficiencies and use the money to pay down bond debt in fiscal 2015.

Creates special House and Senate study committees that will write a single report for the next Legislature on ways to finance highway needs long term.

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