

Transportation plan hits some rough spots

Posted Thursday, Jul. 11, 2013

It looks like the road to a transportation funding solution in the Legislature's second special session of this year is not so smooth after all.

The Senate on Thursday approved its version of a funding plan that would take about \$800 million that otherwise would go into the state's rainy-day fund and use it for transportation instead.

In the first special session, that plan looked ready for final adoption until it got held up behind the last-day Senate filibuster of an abortion restrictions bill.

Now some members of the House Appropriations Committee are not so sure.

Texas Tribune counted Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, the committee's vice chairman among the doubters.

"I want to support transportation. I voted for this bill the first time, but I am thankful that in hindsight that I've had a chance to look at it," Turner told the committee during a meeting on Tuesday.

"I am not alone," he said. "If the vote was held today based on what we know today, based on the discussion that took place today in appropriations, I think the (Senate) bill would fall."

It's disappointing that a way to get more money for transportation projects might not be found quickly. Lawmakers are anxious to wrap up the special session, which began on July 1, and go home.

Finishing up and going home is a good idea. Finding more money for transportation is a good idea. The special session is limited to 30 days.

The solution for transportation must be well thought-out. The Appropriations Committee is right to look at several options.

Transportation Department officials have told lawmakers the need for money is great. They have said population growth and rising construction costs mean the agency needs an extra \$4 billion a year just to maintain current roads at their current congestion levels.

Clearly, the plan approved by the Senate doesn't solve the whole problem. Even at that, the shift of income from the rainy-day fund to transportation would have to be submitted to voters for approval in November as a constitutional amendment.

It might be difficult to sell voters on an idea that's only a stopgap measure.

Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, has proposed another constitutional amendment that would reserve all of the income from the state's 20-cents-per-gallon gasoline tax for use on transportation.

Currently, 25 percent of that tax revenue goes to support public education. Pickett's proposal would take money from the rainy-day fund to replace the education funding.

Frankly, that idea seems half-baked. Public education requires a consistent source of income, not donations from the rainy day fund.

And before Pickett's plan could make it to voters, it would have to gain approval from two-thirds of the House and Senate. That's a high bar to clear.

It's apparent that the House and Senate aren't on parallel paths. So far, there's not even agreement among members on the appropriations committee.

If it comes down to a shoddy transportation plan or no plan at all in this special session, it's better to step back, get some rest (the Legislature has been in session virtually nonstop since early January) and come back later in the year when House and Senate leaders have developed a common goal.

[Looking for comments?](#)