

Cities don't want job of maintaining state roads

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Staff and wire reports

Fort Worth is joining forces with other cities statewide to fight against a proposed Texas Department of Transportation plan to turn over maintenance of nearly 1,900 miles of state highways in urban areas to local governments.

The Texas Transportation Commission, looking for more money to build new roads and maintain the rest of the 80,000-mile state highway system, is considering a "tumbuck" program that, by ceding control of essentially urban state roads to cities and counties, would save the agency \$165 million a year.

Fort Worth and other cities and counties would have to absorb those new costs.

Mayor Betsy Price said the move could add as many as 300 lane miles to amount of roads and highways Fort Worth already maintains.

"It's just a very crippling move for us," she said.

In Fort Worth, parts of Camp Bowie Boulevard and West Rosedale Street are among the sections of road that Fort Worth would have to maintain. Fort Worth already handles litter control and right-of-way mowing for the state on the roads as part of its partnership with the state, Price said.

"It's just trading off state responsibility to us," she said.

She plans to travel to Austin on Aug. 29 to testify before the Texas Department of Transportation Commission, and she expects other mayors to do the same.

There, they'll encounter John Barton, TxDOT's chief engineer, who in a June commission meeting said the program makes sense to the state.

In trying to describe the impact, he explained that it would involve roads like Lamar Boulevard and Burnet Road in Austin that "look like local streets, most people perceive them as local streets and yet ... are a part of the state highway system."

However, the list of more than 600 road segments proposed for transfer to local governments includes not only those street-like highways, but also 10 miles of Loop 360, 8.7 miles of RM 2222 and, oddly, several hundred feet of Texas 165. That "highway" is actually a thin strip of pavement and limestone located within the boundaries of the Texas State Cemetery in East Austin, generally thought to be the shortest highway in Texas.

The proposal has received a cold reception initially from local government officials. The Texas Municipal League, in a press release, said the proposed change could raise property taxes and called it a "massive unfunded mandate."

Austin Mayor Lee Leffingwell is scheduled to meet with TxDOT officials later this week on the subject.

"TxDOT is under financial strains as we all know, and is trying to devolve some of its financial obligations," Leffingwell said. "At the same time, it's a potentially big hardship for us."

It is not clear if TxDOT officials propose to make the road transfers voluntary or mandatory.

"The decision on which roadways are included in the state highway system is made by the commission," TxDOT spokeswoman Veronica Beyer said Monday. "Any changes that are made to that system as part of this initiative will be done so in consultation with the impacted communities."

Passing the buck

Bennett Sandlin, executive director of the municipal league, which represents cities, said his understanding from talking to TxDOT officials is that persuasion would be tried first.

"But TxDOT feels it has the power to do it," Sandlin said. "My understanding is that it is going to happen."

He called it a pass-the-buck gimmick and a massive, unfunded mandate that would increase property taxes on urban homeowners and businesses.

"This plan to abandon maintenance of state highways in 59 Texas cities is not about efficiency," Sandlin said. "It's just the latest gimmick

by state officials to avoid responsibility for providing an adequate highway system for Texas.”

TxDOT has not yet publicly specified the exact segments of highways that would be affected in Tarrant County.

The \$165 million in savings would represent less than 2 percent of TxDOT’s annual spending.

Large cities such as Fort Worth and Arlington cover maintenance costs on state highways outside the curb line, Sandlin said, and cities are often in charge of traffic signal systems on TxDOT local roads.

Barton, in the June meeting, said having the roads fully under local control would have several advantages for cities. City officials, rather than TxDOT, he said, could make decisions about driveway access to the roads, parking, overhead signs and road closures for special events like parades. Cities also could add medians and other landscaping, Barton said, and would be in charge of setting speed limits.

State Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, carried a proposed constitutional amendment in the summer’s final special legislative session that passed and, if voters approve it, will raise more than \$1 billion a year for highway spending. But that is not nearly enough, Nichols said, leaving TxDOT to look for other ways to pay for roads.

“I did nine years of city council and mayor work myself. I wouldn’t like it,” Nichols said, if he were still a local official. “The Legislature needs to fund TxDOT at an adequate level, and we have not done that. You can’t build bricks without straw. TxDOT cannot do the impossible.”

Local impact unclear

Amanda Wilson, a spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said the group’s transportation department was aware of the potential policy. But she said that neither staff members nor the Regional Transportation Council has had a chance to study it in depth.

So far, it is Arlington’s understanding that it has no roads that would be affected, said Jennifer Wichmann, the city’s management resources assistant director.

“We are working hard to keep an eye on this. Even if it does not affect Arlington, we think it is a bad precedent,” Jennifer Wichmann said. “We oppose unfunded mandates.”

Vic Suhm, executive director of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, said the idea is just “one more function of TxDOT’s funding dilemma.”

“They are literally out of money,” he said. “And until that issue is resolved, there are going to be things like this.”

He said that some cities — especially those that share in the department’s budget woes — probably would have trouble taking on high-dollar chunks of road maintenance.

Staff writers Scott Nishimura, Susan Schrock and Elizabeth Campbell contributed to this report, which includes material from the Austin American-Statesman and the Dallas Morning News.

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