

Neither Texas nor cities want costs for roads

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The Texas Department of Transportation, strapped for funds to pay for maintaining highways, wants to push some of that upkeep off on the state's cities.

Not surprisingly, many of those cities are balking at the \$165 million annual cost. Can't blame them for that.

But just as that unfunded mandate is a problem for the cities, it's no real solution for the Transportation Department. There's no pot of gold waiting at the end of the rainbow for either entity to use for roads.

The Legislature failed to fully address what Transportation Department officials say is a \$4 billion annual shortfall in funding needed just to maintain current congestion levels on the state's highways.

Never mind the increase in traffic that's coming as thousands more people move to the state each year.

It's the Legislature that's going to have to find a solution.

The Transportation Department is exploring a "turnback" program in which it would turn over about 1,900 miles of urban roads — think of them as highways that have seen cities grow up around them — to cities for maintenance.

"The turnback program is envisioned as a cooperative venture between [the Transportation Department] and local jurisdictions to increase local control," the department's executive director, Phil Wilson, wrote in an Aug. 13 letter to Taylor County Judge Downing A. Bolls Jr. "The roads under consideration are state-owned, but serve primarily local traffic."

The idea is not without its advantages for cities. They'd have more control over those roads, what sort of signage is used and setting speed limits.

Still, the maintenance cost will be uppermost in the minds of city leaders. Most of them in Tarrant County don't yet know the details of the state proposal.

In Arlington, officials say they have been told the "turnback" might include as much as 14 miles of Collins Street/Texas 157, eight miles of Pioneer Parkway/Texas 303 and four miles of Division Street/Texas 180.

Any change won't happen immediately. The Transportation Commission has scheduled a hearing on the proposal Aug. 29.

Commission members probably will get an earful from city officials and from the Texas Municipal League.

Long-term, the problem facing Texas is not who pays to maintain this relatively small portion of the state's roads. It's where much more money for transportation will come from.

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