

Officials want TxDOT to delay cost-cutting proposals

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State and local officials across Texas are urging the state Department of Transportation to slam the brakes on two controversial cost-cutting measures.

The agency is struggling to stretch its dollars after state lawmakers came up billions short of what agency officials said was needed to maintain the state's current level of congestion.

In South and West Texas counties in the midst of an oil drilling boom, the agency [began this week](#) converting some damaged asphalt roads to gravel. And later this month, the Transportation Commission will consider whether to end TxDOT's long-standing commitment to maintaining some well-traveled urban roads that are part of the state's highway system.

The gravel plan, in particular, has drawn national attention and expressions of outrage from Texas officials worried that the decision is shortsighted and a blow to the state's image.

"While the Legislature has not entirely solved our transportation challenges, I am not convinced that the appropriate solution is to convert paved roads to gravel in areas that are critical to our economic success," state Rep. [Jim Keffer](#), R-Eastland, said Tuesday. He urged TxDOT to issue a 90-day reprieve of the policy to allow for more discussion.

TxDOT officials confirmed Tuesday that two road segments have already been converted to gravel: 3 miles of an Interstate 37 frontage road in Live Oak County and a portion of Farm Road 1916 in Dimmit County. The list of road segments slated for conversion to gravel will grow over time, agency officials said.

On Tuesday, TxDOT officials, including Executive Director Phil Wilson, met in San Antonio with officials from the affected counties and some legislators. TxDOT officials explained that maintaining certain rural road segments at a level safe for drivers has become too expensive as oil field traffic has soared.

"A road that was built for 90 cars a day now has 90 cars a day plus 1,900 trucks, and we're having to go again and again and patch it over," Wilson explained after the meeting.

Local officials are worried that the gravel roads will be less safe, despite TxDOT's plans to reduce the speed limits on them to 30 mph. La Salle County Judge Joel Rodriguez predicted that oil workers driving heavy trucks over the new gravel roads would not observe the lower speed limits.

"TxDOT is not understanding that these people are for-profit and they work for people that are in a race for profit," Rodriguez said. "We believe we're going to have more accidents."

Local officials also argued that TxDOT should have held public hearings on the policy. Agency officials [announced the plan](#) at a July meeting of the Texas Transportation Commission.

"The point was made that TxDOT should have communicated more effectively instead of simply announcing this," said state Sen. [Judith Zaffirini](#), D-Laredo, who attended and helped organize the meeting. "That's why there was such an uproar of negative reaction to it."

TxDOT agreed to allow counties with roads slated to be converted to gravel to request a 60-day delay while local officials search for a way to fund maintenance. Depending on the condition of the road, TxDOT may still need to convert some portion of it to gravel or post signs warning drivers of rough driving conditions during the 60-day period, Wilson said.

TxDOT officials also addressed concerns that drivers on the new gravel roads will deal with plumes of dust and flying rocks. TxDOT Deputy Executive Director John Barton said the conversion process involves grinding the asphalt up and then adding a water/asphalt mixture that reduces the amount of dust the road produces as vehicles drive over it.

"It's going to be a very high-end unpaved roadway," Barton said.

TxDOT is also getting pushback from urban communities over its "turnover proposal." Since June, the Transportation Commission has been considering discontinuing the maintenance of more than 100 miles of roads in cities with populations of 50,000 or more.

The agency currently spends \$165 million a year to maintain the roads, a commitment that began when the roads were part of the state's farm-to-market system. Many of the roads, though, are now major thoroughfares.

Most residents likely do not realize that the state is responsible for their maintenance, Wilson said. He pointed to Westheimer Road in Houston as a good example of a road that, due to Houston's development, no longer should qualify as a state responsibility.

"Forty to sixty years ago, that would have been appropriately part of the farm-to-market road system," Wilson said. "Today, Westheimer is part of the Galleria. Most Texans assume that is a city of Houston street."

Other roads TxDOT currently maintains but may not for much longer include Lamar Road and Martin Luther King Boulevard in Austin and 19th Street in Lubbock.

The Texas Municipal League has accused TxDOT of trying to pass the buck.

"Shifting \$165 million of state costs onto cities would be a massive unfunded mandate that would require higher property taxes on homeowners and businesses," said Bennett Sandlin, TML's executive director.

State Rep. [Ruth McClendon](#), D-San Antonio, wrote Wilson a letter Monday urging the agency to postpone consideration of the plan until other savings were considered.

"This would not be helpful to the city, the county or local taxpayers," McClendon said.

The Transportation Commission will take public comment on the proposal at its monthly meeting Thursday, Barton said.

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