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Straus eyes end to diverting highway funds

Texas' booming economy and massive transportation needs are inching the state toward simplifying highway spending, officials say.

The latest move to end so-called diversions from the State Highway Fund came Wednesday, when Speaker Joe Straus said the next Texas budget proposed by the House will dedicate all the money from the fund to transportation.

"This approach will make the state budget even more straightforward, just as taxpayers expect,"

Straus, R-San Antonio, said in a news release. "It will also provide needed transportation revenue - without a tax increase."

The highway fund, amassed from state gasoline tax revenues and fees for services like driver's license renewals and vehicle registrations, goes mostly to the Texas Department of Transportation. Some of the money, however, goes to law enforcement or other uses.

Shifting all the money to transportation would give TxDOT an additional \$1.3 billion, Straus' office said. Other money would be found for the budgets affected, Straus said, although he did not specify a source.

"We will not abandon the state troopers and others who so bravely serve and protect Texans every day," he said. "The budget is a statement of priorities, and both public safety and mobility are top priorities for the Texas House."

Past attempts to end diversions, no matter how popular, have failed.

"Everybody I have ever talked to wants to end diversions," Harris County Judge Ed Emmett said. "The problem is what do you replace it with? Where are you going to pay them from?"

Emmett, however, said a growing economy might facilitate changes in how Texas divides its tax dollars. "Now is the time to do it, and then if the economy goes south then you decide what you cut."

Increasing transportation spending has been a hard sell, meanwhile, as some lawmakers press for a long-term fix. Straus' announcement signals that a solution is imminent, said Andrea French, executive director of Transportation Advocacy Group - Houston Region, a group of business leaders lobbying for more transportation spending.

As supporters of a proposal to take \$1.4 billion from the state's rainy day fund to use for road improvements gear up for a November election, early discussions about other ways to invest in roads and transit are important, French said.

"Last time, we weren't hearing something coming from the speaker's office so soon," French said. "We're taking this as a good sign."

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