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## The Highwayman

Transportation in Houston with Dug Begley

### Transportation funding still driving blind

Posted on July 16, 2014 | By Dug Begley

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Tuesday's approval of a short-term transportation funding fix and the seemingly inevitable march of it from the U.S. House to the Senate to the president's desk staves off the spending crisis Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx warned about.

Officials are cheering it as a victory. Like what House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman [Bill Shuster, a Pennsylvania Republican, told Reuters](#).



Morning rush hour traffic heading for downtown Houston on Interstate 45 southbound near Cottage Street in August 2012. (Gary Fountain/ For the Chronicle)

"If Congress fails to act, thousands of transportation projects across the country and hundreds of thousands of construction jobs will be at risk," Shuster said. "This legislation provides much needed certainty and stability for the states."

That certainty and stability lasts until May. The reality is transportation planners need a longer time period than that.

Sure, the country has been plodding ahead for some time on funding plans that last months, not years. State and local officials can make educated guesses about what kind of money they will have and plan accordingly. Projects then wait for their turn at the trough and

planners and local officials cobble the money together.

Setting aside what is the best way to pay for transportation, and how much the federal government should spend, their process matters. Even if, like in Texas, federal funding accounts for less than a quarter of all state transportation spending. More than [half the highway money spent by the state](#) comes from state fuel taxes and the vehicle tax.

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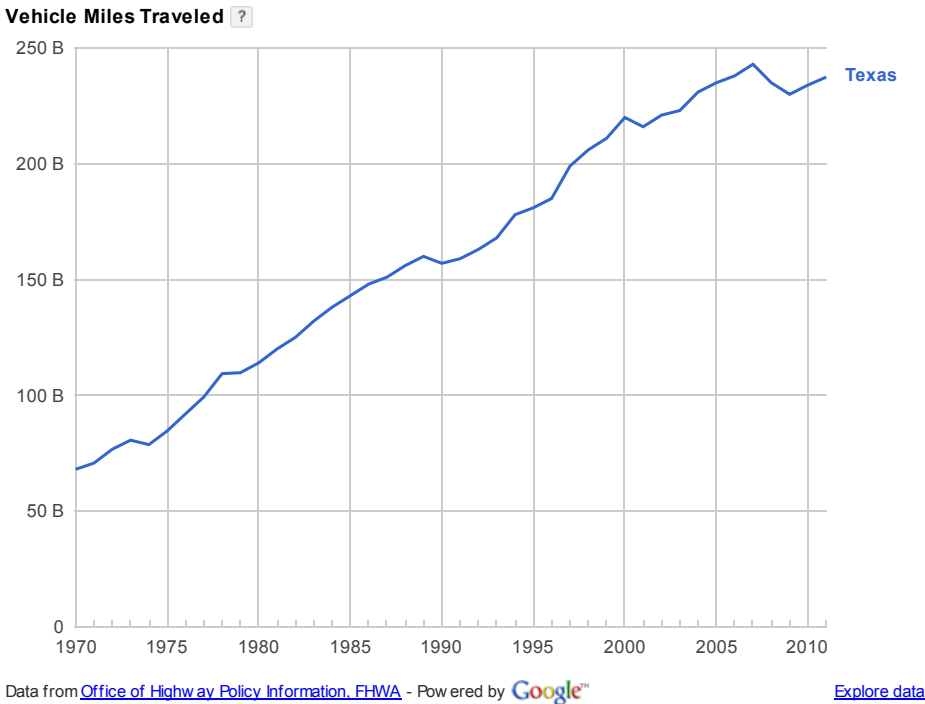
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Where the federal money is crucial is the big projects, the ones aimed at reducing traffic and improving air quality. The projects, like widening Interstate 10, that take years to plot and build. (More on that later.) Having three, four or five years of certainty about how the spending will be doled out annually — and the rules — helps planners know which projects they can reasonably assume to have ready in a few years. That way, projects don't bottleneck and money isn't wasted studying things that will only sit on a shelf.

Getting projects ready in growing Texas is going to continue to be a priority. Figures released Wednesday by the Federal Highway Administration estimated Texas **drivers logged 21.2 billion miles** in April, a 3.5 percent increase from April 2013. Forty states had an increase of 1 percent or greater in April, according to the estimates.

Planning is abstract and unseen for most drivers, but has huge implications on when notorious Houston-area stretches of highway get improved. Federal money, and knowing when its coming, is going to determine a lot of the timing for how something like the Loop 610 interchange with U.S. 59 by The Galleria gets improved. Or when more of U.S. 59 is brought to interstate-class service. Getting the money lined up is the first step to getting something built, but hardly the last. Building can take years for major projects. Crews started widening and improving frontage roads along I-10 between Washington and Taylor in April 2010. As of earlier this week, Texas Department of Transportation officials said the project was 99.9 percent done. Crews are just working through the little tweaks for minor repairs related to the work, TxDOT spokeswoman Deidrea Samuels said. The project's construction cost is shaping up to be \$3.6 million more than officials expected, but Samuels said that's about 2 percent of the total project cost, and well within normal ranges for a project cost changing.



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