



Pickett pleads for transportation support at summit at Fort Bend Infrastructure Summit



Rep. Joe Pickett (D-El Paso) speaks about transportation during the Fort Bend Infrastructure Summit.

By [Alex Endress](#) | Posted 10 hours ago

Texas Rep. Joe Pickett (D-El Paso) visited the Fort Bend Infrastructure Summit last Friday, April 11, to promote a state referendum raising transportation capital from the state's Rainy Day Fund.

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“[Voters] need to believe us, that there is a situation that needs to be addressed,” Pickett said.

Since 2003, Texas has sunk to \$17.1 billion in transportation debt, he said. Pickett attributes this to a decision by state government to begin funding roads primarily through costly toll projects and bonds. Previously, the bulk of this money came from gas taxes along with vehicle registration fees, he noted. Pickett said it would take about \$31 billion to repay the current debt.

Pickett said that for the first time in history, the current budget designates for TxDOT “more money to pay the debt service on bonds than cash to build new roads.”

Since 1991, the gas tax for transportation in Texas has stayed at a flat 20 cents per gallon. Pickett pointed out that this has not changed with rising gas prices or the rate of inflation. Still, as the state’s population grows, people are paying less in gas tax.

“You’re driving cars that get better gas mileage, for the biggest reason, and the other is that some of you are driving less,” Pickett said.

The Rainy Day Fund now gains about \$2 billion each year from oil and gas severance taxes. Currently, there’s about \$8 billion in the fund, and in January 2015 it is projected to grow to about \$11 billion, Pickett said.

The transportation referendum would not implement any tax increases. Though the bill was voted on in 2013, the Texas legislature chose to put it on the 2014 ballot to avoid overwhelming voters with two large pieces of legislation. Prop 6, which was picked for the 2013 ballot, similarly takes \$2 billion from the Rainy Day Fund to support a trust for projects outlined in the state water plan. It was passed in November 2013.

Pickett said HB 1 doesn't solve transportation funding problems, although it is a start. The legislation has achieved bipartisan support. Besides Pickett, it was sponsored by Republican Representatives Larry Phillips, Drew Darby, and Sen. Robert Nichols.

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