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## Eltife: Growing state demands revenue sources for water, roads

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By Glenn Evans [gevans@news-journal.com](mailto:gevans@news-journal.com)

The state senator for Northeast Texas has been looking for a conservative philosophy in Austin for a decade.

What Republican Sen. Kevin Eltife has found, he said Thursday, is state debt that's nearly tripled in that time while fundamental challenges go unmet.

"Water's not fixed, TxDot's not fixed," he said, naming two of four issues the Tyler resident accused his fellow lawmakers of ignoring in favor of red-meat topics that get them elected while the necessities of a growing population draw mostly lip-service.

"We've got the same problems today," Eltife told the News-Journal editorial board, returning several times to a state debt that's risen from \$17 billion, when he took office in 2004, to \$42 billion now. Much of that debt growth has occurred by lawmakers opting to have the Texas Department of Transportation borrow money.

"It's real easy to run on, 'We just need to cut spending, and we don't need any new taxes,' " he said. "At some point, the public is going to demand that we fix these problems. We have cities that are about to be out of water — Wichita Falls is one of them."

The 84th Legislature convenes in January, but Eltife did not sound optimistic his party's leadership or rank-and-file newcomers will treat the coming 140-day session any differently than previous ones.

He said he understands newcomers running on promises of not raising taxes, but meanwhile highways are being built on borrowed money by private companies recovering their investments with tolls.

"I'm not against toll roads; I'm against the way we've done toll roads," he said. "The state should own the toll roads."

Once tolls recoup the costs of construction, he said, they should either be stopped or the revenue forwarded to future road-building.

"If we're so conservative, why are we doubling our debt?" Eltife asked. "You have to have leadership that lays out the problem and lays out the solutions. When you have leadership that is constantly running for higher office, you don't address the problem. They are all running on 'immigration.' Who is running on water and TxDOT?"

Eltife’s other two main areas of concern are in public school finance and increasingly insolvent public pension funds.

Lawmakers in 2013 added more than \$1 billion to state pensions — roughly \$270 million to the Teacher Retirement System and \$650 million to state employee retirement accounts — and trimmed benefits for future retirees.

“But, we still have issues in the pension funds that we have to deal with,” he said, before turning to the \$4.2 billion lawmakers restored to public education last year to replace a similar cut two years before that. (Public education) is still not properly, equitably funded.”

Eltife can be forgiven for sounding like a broken record. He acknowledged saying much the same in the run-up to previous legislative sessions.

He returned to a refrain that stable, new revenue sources are needed to meet the needs of a growing state. He doesn’t care what those might be and is eager to discuss amending the gasoline tax, vehicle sales tax, user fees, other avenues that could return Texas to its former pay-as-you-go practices.

“When I talk to groups — even the tea party groups — when I talk to groups and lay out the debt we’ve incurred ... Would you rather have increased the gas tax 10 cents 10 years ago? The answer is overwhelmingly, ‘Yes. The gas tax,’ ” he said. “Your answer to water and TxDOT are not more cuts. We ought to be proud that we have a growing state and the needs are there.”

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