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November proposition would change road funding

SAN ANTONIO — With funding to maintain the state's road network increasingly hard to come by, San Antonio and Texas business leaders Monday encouraged voters to support passage of a constitutional amendment in November to help finance road projects and pushed for a laundry list of other measures to boost the state's highway fund.

Some of those proposals include:

Doubling the state's \$50 motor vehicle registration fee;

Ending the diversion of gasoline tax revenues to other services;

Building more toll roads, possibly in partnership with the private sector, like part of the Texas 130 toll road.

Officials also called on Congress to reauthorize the federal Highway Trust Fund, which is set to expire in August.

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The news conference, held hours before U.S. House Speaker John Boehner spoke at a fundraiser in San Antonio, marks what has become a familiar refrain by many Texas business and civic leaders: There's not enough money to maintain, let alone improve, the state's road infrastructure, which they say can't handle growing congestion.

Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business, called on Boehner to help ensure that a five- or six-year federal transportation bill is passed, although he said many expect Congress to settle on a shorter-term, stopgap measure.

The federal government is the biggest source of revenue for the state's highway fund, according to the Texas comptroller's office. Federal funding makes up about 35 percent of the Texas Department of Transportation's annual budget, said Vic Boyer, president and CEO of the San Antonio Mobility Coalition.

Scott Haywood, president of Move Texas Forward, a coalition that supports "a balanced approach to state budget decisions," explained that his organization supports approval of Proposition 1, the statewide constitutional amendment that, if passed, would shift about \$1.4 billion from the state's rainy day fund to the state highway fund. All the money would go to new construction and maintenance of the existing state highway system, Haywood said, and no proceeds could go to toll road projects.

Passing the proposition is crucial because "we haven't kept pace from an infrastructure standpoint," he said.

That's been a particular problem in the state's energy sectors, where the boom in oil and gas production has brought heavy truck traffic, causing widespread damage to roads.

On Monday night, Frio County officials held a forum about Proposition 1 and how oil and gas production in the Eagle Ford Shale has affected roads. Not only is there tremendous truck traffic on Interstate 35, but energy disposal companies are setting up on Frio County frontage roads, which can't handle the congestion, said Sally Velasquez, who handles the county's government affairs.

Oil and gas severance tax revenue generated in places such as the Eagle Ford is what replenishes the rainy day fund, and that's where money for Proposition 1 will come from, Velasquez said.

"So we want to see that money back to the energy sector," she said.

But even if the proposition passes, Hammond said Texas will still be \$3 billion to \$4 billion short of what's needed.

Hammond's organization is calling for the state to, among other changes, double the vehicle registration fee, which now is about \$50.

Additionally, he encourages the state to use all or part of the motor vehicle sales tax for the highway fund instead of putting it in the general fund. Toll roads should be built, where appropriate. And in some cases, the private sector should construct them. He also called for ending gas-tax diversions — a nickel of the 20-cent state gas tax goes to education.

“Our goal is to maintain the level of congestion, which is not exactly nirvana,” Hammond said, but it would be an improvement.

If the proposition succeeds, “it will send a message” to legislators that transportation funding is a priority for voters, said Duane Wilson, president and CEO of the North San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.

Ramiro Cavazos, president of the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said getting more funding for San Antonio is the priority.

While Hammond wants to concentrate on Texas roads, Cavazos said the funding needs to be part of a comprehensive plan that includes not just new roads and toll projects but also alternatives, such as VIA Metropolitan Transit's proposed downtown streetcar.

“It needs to be a full plate of efforts,” he said.

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