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TxDOT May Get Extra Money for Damaged Roads

State lawmakers may give the Texas Department of Transportation an extra \$250 million for road projects in communities affected by an ongoing oil drilling boom. But a controversial plan to convert some roads to gravel may still move forward, officials said Wednesday.

Legislative Budget Board staff told a Senate Select Committee on Transportation Funding at a hearing on Wednesday that the state's highway fund received about \$250 million more in registration fees than had been expected earlier this year. The money had not been appropriated to TxDOT during this year's legislative session.

The two-year budget lawmakers passed in May included a rider that allows TxDOT to spend extra money in the State Highway Fund if the governor and the 10-member Legislative Budget Board approve the spending.

State Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, directed leaders at TxDOT's to immediately submit a plan to fund dozens of high-priority projects in counties where a surge in truck traffic tied to the oil drilling boom is destroying roads.

"I'm prepared today, if you guys will draft the request for us, to appropriate that money to address this specific need," Williams told TxDOT officials. "I think that the lieutenant governor shares my concerns about this, and he wants to try and address this."

Lawmakers spent part of the hearing grilling TxDOT officials about the controversial plan to convert 83 miles of paved rural farm-to-market roads to gravel. The agency has said the roads are safety hazards because of the damage from drilling trucks. Given the level of traffic expected on those roads as the drilling boom continues, agency officials say TxDOT lacks the funding to keep them paved.

"Repair is simply not cost effective and safety risks continue to rise," TxDOT Executive Director Phil Wilson said.

The extra \$250 million in funding would not be enough to allow TxDOT to commit to maintaining the 83 miles of paved roads, TxDOT Deputy Executive Director John Barton said.

"We'll monitor those roadways, and if they get to the point where it's unsafe for the public without converting them, we will convert them," Barton said.

State Sen. Carlos Uresti, D-San Antonio, said that lawmakers were not told during the session that the agency would convert roads to gravel if it did not get enough funding. TxDOT officials said they discussed the possibility at a public hearing and with some lawmakers. The Legislature gave TxDOT several billion dollars less than officials had said were needed to address congestion and safety issues around the state.

Williams told TxDOT officials that the extra \$250 million in funding was contingent on the agency agreeing to hold public hearings before converting roads to gravel in the future. He also urged local officials in the impacted counties to work with TxDOT to find a way to avoid converting roads to gravel. When Uresti expressed concern that some roads would still be converted to gravel in the meantime, Williams said that some local officials may need to accept that.

“You guys need to put it in the rearview mirror,” Williams said. “There are a lot of problems all over the state, and it’s not just about these 83 miles of road. It’s about people who are sitting in traffic for an hour and half to go a mile or two. There are those problems, too. So don’t look a gift horse in the mouth is my advice to you.”

After converting two road segments to gravel in August, TxDOT instituted a 60-day moratorium on the plan that expires at the end of October. Uresti released a statement after the hearing Wednesday expressing optimism that TxDOT would extend the moratorium.

"We will continue to work with counties to explore solutions," Uresti said. "More must be done to propose and evaluate alternatives before the moratorium ends later this month."

Ginger Goodin, a senior research engineer at the Texas A&M Transportation Institute, testified at Wednesday's hearing that Texas is not alone in its plan to convert roads to gravel. South Dakota has been converting paved roads to gravel for years. Several other states are considering whether to do the same as transportation funding becomes tighter, she said.