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As Perry Exits, Texas GOP Shifting Away From Toll Roads

by [Aman Batheja](#) | July 4, 2014 | [27 Comments](#)



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photo by: Spencer Selvidge

Texas toll road SH130

The Texas Republican state convention drew national headlines last month with candidates and activists staking out **hard-line positions** on

homosexuality and immigration.

Less noticed was a significant shift in the party's stance on transportation, particularly the state's reliance on toll roads. In the new platform, Republican delegates removed a provision backing "the legitimate construction of toll roads in Texas" and replaced it with language opposing some aspects of toll projects in Texas, particularly the use of public money to subsidize private entities.

The conservative pushback against toll roads comes as Gov. [Rick Perry](#) prepares to leave office after 14 years marked by a

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[sustained push for toll roads and toll lanes](#). With about 25 toll roads in the state, according to the Texas Department of Transportation, the state has used the projects to stretch limited funds and expand its highway network. Most of the state's toll roads had been opened or expanded since 2000, the year Perry became governor.

“There is an enormous amount of toll fatigue in Texas,” said Susan Fletcher, a Republican delegate from Collin County who supported the new platform language.

Terri Hall, founder of the anti-toll road group [Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom](#), led the effort to change the platform position. To explain why delegates had adopted her proposals with little debate, she pointed to a 41-mile stretch of Highway 130 between Austin and Seguin. The privately run toll road opened in 2012 with lawmakers promoting it as a model for the future. Yet the road has not proved popular with drivers. Last month, Moody's Investors Service reported that toll revenue had come in [far below initial projections](#).

“The grassroots don't want any of this,” Hall said. “This isn't a good deal for the taxpayer. We're not getting our congestion solved.”

Yet toll roads, often in concert with private partners, remain a crucial part of the state's transportation strategy. Billions of dollars in new projects are being developed.

At a recent state Senate hearing, transportation officials spoke about the value of public-private partnerships, often as part of toll projects, to expand highway capacity years earlier than otherwise possible. James Bass, TxDOT's chief financial officer, noted that the state gas tax paid by Texans — and used to finance highways — had not changed since 1991, while construction costs had more than doubled.

“The purchasing power of that 20-cent fuel tax now is the equivalent of 8 cents,” Bass said. He added that federal funding had also become less reliable in recent years

The Republican platform urges lawmakers to “adequately fund our highways” without tolls and asserts the party's opposition

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to “the use of taxpayer money to subsidize, guarantee, prop up or bail out any toll projects, whether public or private.”

Toll roads were also a topic at last week’s [Democratic state convention](#) in Dallas, where delegates amended [the platform](#) to call for legislation directing private firms operating toll roads to give more revenue to the state. The platform already included opposition to the use of public-private partnerships to develop toll roads.

Since the 2013 legislative session, lawmakers have debated how to close an estimated \$4 billion annual shortfall between the transportation department’s budget and what the agency needs to maintain current levels of traffic. The removal of tolling as an option would make that more difficult, said David Ellis, a research scientist with the [Texas A&M Transportation Institute](#).

“That \$4 billion number assumes we continue to build toll roads at about the same rate we built over the last 10 years or so,” Ellis said.

[Greg Abbott](#), the Republican attorney general who is running for governor, echoed that sentiment in his keynote speech.

“My plan will build the roads for the Texas of tomorrow without raising a single penny in taxes, fees or tolls,” Abbott said.

His Democratic opponent, state Sen. [Wendy Davis](#), has also called for more money for roads but has not yet said what role tolling would play.

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