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## Hope Remains for Partial Victory on Road Cash

by [Aman Batheja](#) | May 15, 2013 | [5 Comments](#)

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The route to finding billions of dollars in extra funding for Texas road construction and maintenance has narrowed in the legislative session's final days. But some lawmakers working on the issue say a partial victory remains within reach.

"Until the gavel comes down, a lot of things can happen," House Transportation Chairman [Larry Phillips](#), R-Sherman, said on Tuesday, 13 days before the session wraps up.

After a decade of relying largely on borrowed funds and tolling to maintain the state's transportation network, the Texas Department of Transportation's spending is set to plummet after 2015. TxDOT Executive Director Phil Wilson has said the agency needs [\\$4 billion a year](#) in additional funding just to maintain current levels of congestion in light of the state's booming population growth.

On top of that, officials from rural counties in South Texas hit by an unprecedented natural gas boom argue they need more financing to [repair roads pummeled by drilling activity](#). On Tuesday, Gov. [Rick Perry](#) and key budget leaders met to discuss that issue. Leaving the meeting, state Rep. [Jim Keffer](#), R-Eastland, said he hoped lawmakers could find \$500 million for those areas.

"It's important," Keffer said. "It's the whole damn economy that revolves around it."

*World Changers Shaped Here*



While counties in the Eagle Ford Shale may receive some extra funding for their roads, the rest of the state could be left on the curb.

“Transportation funding is moving very slowly,” said Senate Transportation Committee Chairman [Robert Nichols](#), R-Jacksonville. “I don’t see it getting done this session.”

Others were cautiously optimistic that some money would be found — but far below the \$4-billion-a-year threshold put forth by TxDOT. A lot will happen in the last few days of a session, said state Rep. [Joe Pickett](#), D-El Paso.

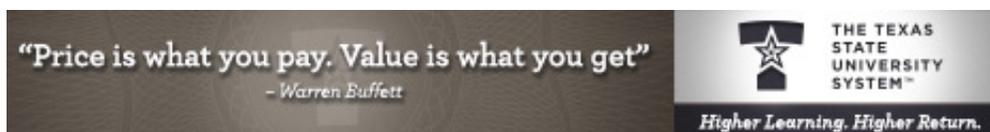
“I know it’s going to sound contradictory but it’s a little too early,” Pickett said. “I think when we get down to the last few bills that we know are going to live, we can look at those for possibilities.”

House Appropriations Chairman [Jim Pitts](#) agreed, noting that some key budget bills that lawmakers still have to pass could be amended to address funding for TxDOT.

“We’ve still got several vehicles out there ... that we could put transportation in,” Pitts said.

Several ideas have been floated to raise revenue for TxDOT including increasing various fees, dedicating the sales tax currently collected on auto sales to road construction and tapping the Rainy Day Fund to provide loans for road projects.

Earlier this month, state Rep. [Drew Darby](#), R-San Angelo, withdrew his bill to raise vehicle registration fees from the House floor, [citing significant opposition](#) to the measure.



A day before that, Perry said lawmakers could avoid a special session by sending him “a balanced budget that has no fee increases for transportation and \$2 billion for infrastructure for water.”

The fact that there was no reference to significant funding for transportation on Perry's must-have list has raised concerns that the governor has given up on that goal for the session.

Perry spokesman Josh Havens said that’s not the case.

“At the beginning of session, Gov. Perry made it very clear to the Legislature that his priorities for this session included a significant, one-time investment in transportation and water infrastructure projects,” Havens said. “Additionally, he has called for freeing up more than a billion dollars in ongoing biennial funding by ending State Highway Fund diversions and identifying a long-term funding solution for transportation. We continue to work with the members and are confident that these priorities will be addressed by the end of session.”

Many in the Capitol remain skeptical. Some lawmakers are already talking about how to find money for TxDOT next session. Nichols, a former Texas transportation commissioner, said that approach ignores what the delay in a funding solution will mean for a state that will continue adding cars to its roads.

“It’s going to be a delay of several years on new congestion-relieving projects,” Nichols said. “You’ll have a hiccup in the entire process, a very substantial hiccup.”

*Morgan Smith contributed to this report.*

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