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House Rejected Late Senate Proposal for Roads Money

by [Aman Batheja](#) | May 25, 2013 | [6 Comments](#)

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photo by: Mark Graham

Part of the elevated section of Chisholm Trail Parkway that is under construction near downtown Fort Worth TX.

A last-ditch effort by Senate budget leaders to find more funding for the Texas Department of Transportation was rebuffed by the House, according to people involved in budget negotiations.

Since the start of the legislative session, Senate Finance Chairman [Tommy Williams](#), R-The Woodlands, and Senate Transportation Chairman [Robert Nichols](#), R-Jacksonville, have been among the most vocal proponents of finding more revenue for TxDOT, which has said it needs \$4 billion more in extra funding each year just to maintain current congestion around the state.

"The one thing I think we're falling short on is transportation funding," Williams said on the Senate floor earlier this week, as he laid out the details of a budget deal to fellow senators.

In the final week of the session, Williams and Nichols finalized details for a proposal to provide a steady stream of new funding for TxDOT via the Rainy Day Fund. Nearly all of the money in the fund comes from oil and gas production taxes. The recent oil and gas drilling boom has filled the fund's coffers with billions of dollars. Williams and Nichols wanted lawmakers to consider splitting off half of the future revenue traditionally earmarked for the fund and putting it into Fund 6, also known as the state's highway fund, according to people involved with the budget negotiations. The plan could have meant nearly \$1 billion in extra revenue for TxDOT annually.

Both Williams and Nichols declined to comment through spokesmen, as did House Speaker [Joe Straus](#). A spokesman for House Appropriations Chairman [Jim Pitts](#) did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

World Changers Shaped Here



Under the current budget deal, TxDOT would receive \$400 million in gas tax revenue that has been traditionally diverted to the Department of Public Safety. The agency is also likely to receive \$450 to \$500 million to repair roads torn up by heavy drilling activity in the parts of the state in the midst of an oil drilling boom.

The conversation over this new proposal was to happen via Senate Joint Resolution 1, a measure that has emerged as [pivotal](#) to a budget deal crafted by both chambers over the last two weeks. In its current form, the resolution would give voters the chance to approve amending the Texas Constitution to create new water infrastructure funds. As part of the deal, the Senate was expected to approve changes to the resolution made by the House on Friday. Instead, the Senate requested a conference committee to resolve differences between the two chambers' versions.

Williams wanted to use the conference committee as an opportunity to pitch his and Nichols' idea, according to people aware of the discussions. To make that possible in the waning days of the session, the House also had to agree to a conference committee. Friday evening, the House adjourned without appointing conferees for SJR 1. That decision forces the Senate to accept the resolution under its current form or scuttle the entire budget deal.

The proposal may have also been doomed by how late in the session it was offered up by the Senate. To sell such a dramatic change to the budget plan in the full House would have been a challenge, especially considering that [some House Republicans believe](#) that the Legislature is already spending too much from the Rainy Day Fund this session. Gov. [Rick Perry](#), who said Friday he had [reservations](#) about how the budget deal spends \$1.75 billion from the Rainy Day Fund to undo an accounting gimmick, also could have complicated efforts to make another big change to the proposal so late in the game.

Straus signaled earlier in the week that efforts to find additional money for transportation were dead for the session. While he had cited finding funding for a "healthy transportation system" as a priority at the start of the session, he made no mention of roads in a statement on the budget deal Wednesday.

"In the coming days I expect the House to conclude a very successful session by taking the final votes necessary to address our water needs, pass a balanced budget, improve public education and make state government more transparent and efficient," Straus said. "I want to thank members for their work on these critical priorities."



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