

TEXAS WEEKLY

AN EXCLUSIVE PUBLICATION OF
THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

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PAST ISSUES

Why Selling Next Year's Road Prop Could be Tricky

by [Aman Batheja](#) | August 14, 2013 (August 7, 2013 for [Subscribers](#))

When is a little help worse than no help at all?

That's the question some transportation advocates are asking now as lawmakers try to give the Texas Department of Transportation a fraction of what it needs to maintain the state's current state of traffic.

The agency is like a stranded motorist on the side of the road with a flat tire and smoke coming out of the hood. Good Samaritans with jacks and spares are nice but you hope they don't scare off someone who knows how to fix the engine.



[Enlarge](#)

photo illustration by: Todd Wiseman / Mikel Manitiuis

The Texas Legislature [closed out](#) the third special session this week as they voted to send to voters a constitutional amendment in 2014 that would boost TxDOT's funding by an estimated \$1.2 billion a year. The measure takes advantage of the current oil and gas drilling boom by diverting to the state's highway fund half of the energy production taxes currently flowing to the Rainy Day Fund.

While \$1.2 billion a year is more than the entire transportation budget for some states, it's a far cry from addressing TxDOT's shortfall. The agency has said it needs \$4 billion more a year to maintain current congestion. That doesn't count another \$1 billion a year needed to address the incredible damage energy sector development is doing to roads in west and south Texas. The agency recently attracted widespread outrage and dismay when it announced plans to convert some [unsafe roads to gravel](#) because it can't afford to fix them.



Calls for raising more money for transportation are [likely to be louder](#) in the 2015 legislative session. In the meantime, advocates for the constitutional amendment have the tricky challenge of convincing voters that it is worth their attention, while not giving them the false impression that it will solve TxDOT's funding woes. If they oversell it, they could sap the political will to pursue more meaningful revenue-raisers.

"We're concerned about it, but at the same time, we're not going to miss this opportunity based on fear," said Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond.

The author of the plan, state Rep. [Joe Pickett](#), D-El Paso, said 2015 will be tough no matter what, but that doing nothing until then is far worse.

"If this doesn't pass and the voters ultimately don't pass it, it'll be hell next session trying to fill that hole," he told reporters before the House passed his measure.

The size of that hole was on transportation commissioners' minds at a meeting last month. Several expressed frustration that even a partial fix to TxDOT's shortfall was proving so tough to pass. Commission Chairman Ted Houghton said he has heard some suggest that "we ought to let this thing go into the ditch and have a scorched earth and let the Legislature deal with it."



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“Maybe that’s the way to get their attention,” he said.

Now they have to get the attention of voters.



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