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## TxDOT takes first step in ending highway fund ‘diversions’

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The revenue-strapped Texas Department of Transportation moved forward Thursday with plans to curb “diversions” of highway funds to other state agencies.

The Texas Transportation Commission, which oversees TxDOT, approved a legislative agenda in Dallas that asks lawmakers to stop using money from the highway fund for agencies including the Department of Public Safety and Department of Motor Vehicles.

State officials estimate that more than \$618 million in gas taxes and drivers’ license fees that could go to TxDOT are sent to other agencies each year. Texas House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, said in May that the next legislative budget should stop the practice.

“It begins here with us petitioning for it,” Ted Houghton, the commissioner chair, said before the vote.

The commission convened its monthly meeting in Dallas this week. Regional and local officials spoke about several area projects, including a study about the fate of Interstate 345 near downtown Dallas and plans for the city’s tolled Trinity Parkway.

The commission also conducted routine business, including the passage of its legislative agenda. Commissioner Victor Vandergriff cast the sole dissenting vote on that matter. One of his issues was with wording that referred to the stream of money to outside agencies as diversions.

Lawmakers frequently use the word to refer to taxes and fees that could go to TxDOT but instead go to agencies that could also be funded from the state’s general fund. Agency insiders don’t use the word diversion, because the Texas Constitution explicitly says that gas taxes and some fees can be used for government functions ancillary to building infrastructure, such as policing roadways and overseeing road safety.

### Funds don’t exist

TxDOT has said for years that it does not have enough money to maintain its current infrastructure and build to keep up with projected population growth.

Attempts to fix transportation funding woes have failed in Austin repeatedly. Regional planners say that’s why more toll roads and toll lanes are beginning to appear in North Texas.

In last year’s legislative session, lawmakers agreed to ask voters whether they want to send excess energy tax revenues to TxDOT instead of banking it in the ballooning rainy day fund. Voters will weigh in on that in November.

That money is expected to partially fill TxDOT’s estimated shortfall by giving it about \$1.4 billion more a year.

State Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, told commissioners that he believes there are enough votes in the Legislature to fix transportation funding. He doesn’t want to raise any taxes or create new fees, but send more existing streams of money TxDOT’s way. The legislative session starts in January.

“Transportation this time, along with education, is going to be the core issue,” Leach told *The Dallas Morning News*.

**Live close to work**

Before the transportation commission voted on business matters Thursday, it heard from area leaders about local projects. Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins, who presides over the county commissioners court, said officials have to give people reasons to live close to work so suburban sprawl doesn't continue to undermine the region's urban core.

Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings told commissioners that some people believe they only need to be able to travel within a 5-mile radius of their house. Others, he said, want to be able to move around the entire region.

It's the needs of people who drive far that make the controversial Trinity toll road "critical," Rawlings said.

Vandergriff also discussed a study on the fate of I-345 that is about to begin. A grass-roots effort to demolish the highway and replace it with a street-level boulevard has gained mainstream momentum. Many local officials say too many people use the elevated connector that forms downtown's eastern border.

*Staff writer Terrence Stutz contributed to this report.*

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**Pat Patterson**

5 days ago

Who is the mainstreet momentum that wants to get rid of 345? Nothing more than greedy developers with unrealistic pie in the sky ideas that everything should be a walkable city where you can get everything you need by magically walking outside your door and all these people want to drive to some inner city park to get coffee at Starbucks and watch the sunset. Most people in Dallas could care less about this. I've looked at some of the projects where they cram people into high rise apartments where the cheapest apartment is at least \$1500 a month for a 500 square foot single up to \$3000 a month. Who can afford that and how much higher would they cost in the 345 area? Developers don't care a whit about drivers and where to shove 700,000 vehicles a week that use 345 and proclaim they're all out of town drivers. You say that too many people use 345 - how moronic is that. Who determined that? By that illogical proclamation, too