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## Everything's bigger in Texas, except share of federal highway fund

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WASHINGTON — Texas leaders have long complained that the state gets shortchanged by the program that funds most highway and transit projects in the country.

Just a few years ago, it had plenty of company. As recently as 2005, Texas was one of 10 “donor” states that sent Washington more gas and diesel tax revenue than the federal Highway Trust Fund returned.

Now, just four states fall into that category. In fiscal 2012, the most recent year for which data was available, Texas received 89 cents for each dollar of revenue.

“It would be much more fair to allow each state to keep the dollars it collects,” said state Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, an Irving Republican who is a member of the House Transportation Committee. “The federal funding isn’t flowing back to Texas.”

It’s a chronic complaint. Large states with major transportation needs, such as Texas and California, have typically fared the worst throughout the 58-year history of the trust fund.

The fund is supported by gas and diesel tax revenue, so it’s Texas drivers who aren’t fully getting their money back.

But over the years, less money has gone to the fund overall as people drive less and vehicle fuel efficiency improves. The shortfalls have prompted several cash infusions from Congress, most recently \$10.8 billion in July.

Since states are putting less money into the trust fund, it’s been harder for them to argue they’re not getting a fair shake.

Texas received more than it sent to the program from 2007 to 2011. In the current fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, the state is guaranteed 95 percent of its contribution from fiscal 2012, or \$3.3 billion, thanks to a provision meant to minimize big differences among states.

In 2012 and 2013, no such assurances were in place.

But the debate over gas taxes today is muted compared with past years. In 2009, former Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison proposed a bill that would allow states to withdraw from the Federal Highway Fund and keep gas tax dollars.

Hutchison, a Republican who sat on the powerful Appropriations Committee, served when pork barrel spending was more popular — a stark contrast from the fiscal restraint prized in Washington today. She left the Senate in 2013.

“Senator Hutchison was very much involved in making sure Texas got its share of federal receipts,” said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston.

Hutchison’s successor, Sen. Ted Cruz, supports giving states more control over highway funding. He’s pushing for the federal gas tax to be cut to the level needed to maintain the interstate system.

That approach "frees states to determine how to best fund their own roads and limits the D.C. bureaucracy," Cruz spokeswoman Catherine Frazier said.

### **Solution elusive**

Nick Wade, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Transportation, said that more funding would help but that large-scale change is needed most. The department "is more concerned with Congress finding a long-term solution to federal transportation funding that provides certainty," Wade said.

Federal funding from the gas tax has been used for projects as minor as widening two-lane rural highways. It's also been applied to bigger efforts, like the reconstruction of Interstate 35E from Dallas to Denton.

The \$818 million Horseshoe Project, which will upgrade the Trinity River bridges on I-30 and I-35 in downtown Dallas, included \$181 million in federal funds.

### **Temporary fixes**

Since 2008, lawmakers have kept the fund solvent through temporary fixes, unable to agree on a broader solution.

The rate of the federal taxes — 18.4 cents a gallon for gasoline and 24.4 cents a gallon for diesel — last increased in 1993. As the amount of gas used by American vehicles has declined, the fund's revenues have been sapped. People aren't driving as much, either.

So Congress has had to pump other money into the fund to keep it afloat. That's improved Texas' return, but the state still has the poorest standing for 2012 at 89 cents on the dollar. By contrast, Alaska's share was \$5.92 per dollar paid in.

Still, Texas took in the second-highest amount from the federal government at \$3.1 billion. Alaska received \$565 million.

State officials say temporary funding from Congress is problematic, particularly as the nation's highways age. The \$10.8 billion approved in July doles out money through May.

"These short-term extensions have made it very difficult to forecast projects that take a number of years," said Ben Husch, a committee director at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Harper-Brown, the Irving state representative, cited I-35 in southeastern and southern Texas as a project on which construction stalled several times over funding concerns.

Many lawmakers agree a long-term solution for the perpetually strapped fund is needed. But no single plan has drummed up enough support so far.

A possible solution, raising fuel taxes, has drawn backlash, especially from Republicans who are averse to any kind of tax hike. The Obama administration has also resisted calls to support a higher gas tax, a proposal pushed by Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut and Republican Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee.

Before the most recent highway money was approved, Sen. John Cornyn said proposals on the issue have been a tough sell.

"A number of people have come up with some interesting ideas," he said. "We need to do better next year after this temporary fix expires."

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 **Jim Baxa** 4 days ago  
Texas will be better off as an independent nation, so we can make our own decisions about our own roads.  
Reply Share 1 reply 1 0

 **Ward Lawrence** 4 days ago  
I definitely agree Jim. Go to texnat.org.  
Reply Share 0 0

 **Richard** 4 days ago  
This article is so slanted with truths that favor only a republican agenda. The data in this article seem to be a little false. There are federal laws in place to determine the distribution of fuel taxes collected by each state & remitted to the federal government "each state is guaranteed a threshold minimum return on its share of contributions (92 percent as of 2008 under SAFETEA-LU). Since contributions by highway users in each state cannot be directly measured, procedures have been developed to attribute funds to the states."  
Life would be so simple if only everyone one was living in the dream world you portroyed in your article "each state is guaranteed a threshold minimum return on its share of contributions (92 percent as of 2008 under SAFETEA-LU). Since contributions by highway users in each state cannot be directly measured, procedures have been developed to attribute funds to the states.". I suggest reading who want the truth look in the facts instead of reading a slanted article by the Dallas Morning Snooze.  
Reply Share 1 2

 **Geo Alo** 4 days ago  
Where is the argument for research and development that will allow for better roads that last longer and require less maintenance? Concrete, asphalt and steel are so 20th century.  
Reply Share 1 0

 **Alixia** 4 days ago  
Just think if Texas had opted into the Ponzi scheme of medicaid expansion and all the strings attached for Obamacare how much debt we would be in 5 yrs from now.  
Common sense goes a long way, too bad democrats can't see past today in fiscal decisions they make.  
Reply Share 2 replies 5 3

 **Drew** 4 days ago

Since the Texas constitution requires a balanced budget, it is not hard to imagine that amount of debt.

Reply Share 1 1



**Richard** 4 days ago

Well if Texas wasn't so concerned about the rich getting richer, the State of Texas would have been much better off to have accepted this money. The boarder states, Texas, California, New Mexico & Arizona, recieved over a billion dollars a few years back in order to save the county hospitals form shutting down. These hospitals are providing serve to the poor, or uninsured & getting funds from the federal government away. Texas is out of billions of dollars because of the currently arrested governor, charged with felony charges, who refused the assistance from the federal government. All because Texas does not want to provide, or take care of it's own. Texas wants all the cheap illegal labor from Mexico, but doesn't want to be responsible for it, or anyone one else in the state who isn't wealthy. Here's recent article about the recklessness imposed on the citizen of Texas by the current governor, Rick Perry "With 24 percent of the population uninsured at any one time, Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the country. True, as the Urban Institute study cited above shows, the deal would require Texas to invest \$5.7 billion of state money during the decade from 2012 to 2022. But in return Texas would receive \$65.6 billion of federal money, of which Texas hospitals would receive \$34.3 billion, undoubtedly leading them to hire many more Texans..

Reply Share 1 2



**richard schumacher** 4 days ago

Is state pork better than federal pork? Why should Dallas gas taxes pay for an oil drilling road out in the Panhandle?

Reply Share 0 0



**Richard** 4 days ago

It's called an interstate highway system for a reason people. This article gives no factual data, just an opinion on a few numbers. Where's the rest of the factual data, or will it shine a light on the truth of the matter.

Reply Share 2 5



**Randy McDonald** 4 days ago

Let's see... Democrats are running Washington and you are surprised that Texas is getting shortchanged. Get real.

Reply Share 2 replies 11 9



**Richard** 4 days ago

Let's see, if you knew how the government worked (i.e. Congress controls the money - taught to most Americans in the first grade) then you wouldn't have made such a ignorant comment.

Reply Share 8 5



**Drew** 4 days ago

The article states that in the years Democrats had full control (Pres, House, and Senate) Texas got more than it sent in. It was the time before '07 and after '11 that Texas didn't get as much as it sent in.

Reply Share 2 1



**AdamsonScott1** 4 days ago

How about we keep our money instead of having it stolen from us without our consent and given to people and projects not of our choosing?

Reply Share 2 replies 9 3



**JulieB** 4 days ago

If you don't like gas taxes, get a bicycle.

Reply Share 1 reply 3 2



**Bullfrog** 4 days ago

I don't think that's what he meant. I think he's saying giving our gas taxes to the federal govt and not getting all of it back.

but I agree with both of you. If you don't like gas taxes get a bike or ride DART where other people pay taxes to subsidize your transportation.

Reply Share 1 1



**Fred Bailey**

4 days ago

ALL "federal" dollars come with very heavy strings attached. "They" will give us our money back, but then "they" expect us to fall in lock step with all of their desires.

Texas doesn't need to be burdened with obligations to federal dollars.

Reply Share 4 replies

7 6



**Michael Wallace**

4 days ago

Fred Bailey, if we quit taking money 'with strings' we would receive no tax money from anywhere and nothing would get built. No bridges, no overpasses, no roads. Local, state, and federal funds all have 'strings'.

Reply Share 3 replies

6 3



**AdamsonScott1**

4 days ago

So in your mind, the government is the only entity that can build things?

Reply Share

6 3



**Fred Bailey**

4 days ago

Michael Wallace- with all due respect, sir, I'm cool with that. Maybe you aren't far enough along in the financial/givment/nonproductive evolutionary chain yet to realize that the government produces NOTHING but debt, regulations and paperwork.

We will do just fine with much less government/taxes/mooches.

Reply Share 1 reply

4 6



**Michael Wallace**

4 days ago

Fred Bailey, government produces something much more important than money and finances.

Government produces order, civilization, and cooperation where people learn to work together for the good of all.

Of course, that sometimes takes debt, regulations, and paperwork.

Where does your money come from?

Reply Share

2 1