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Texas House speaker: Road funding to be short even if Proposition 1 passes

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The state's systematic transportation shortfalls are poised to take a front seat in next year's legislative session — even if voters next month agree to send billions to the state highway fund.

The Texas Department of Transportation estimates it will lack about \$5 billion needed annually to maintain current infrastructure and build new highways and roads to keep up with expected population growth. Next month's Proposition 1 will ask voters to send a portion of energy production tax revenues currently going in a savings account to the state's highway fund.

That alone is expected to give TxDOT an additional \$1.7 billion, but leaves a significant gap compared with what TxDOT needs to keep pace.

"It's by no means the solution to transportation needs in Texas," said Texas House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio.

Straus and a slate of North Texas legislators were in Dallas on Wednesday for a closed-door discussion on transportation funding and other state issues with members of the Dallas Regional Chamber. Straus said topics included the beleaguered Texas Enterprise Fund and Dallas becoming ground zero for the first human case of Ebola diagnosed in the United States.

Proposition 1 has received widespread bipartisan support across the state. The amendment expressly forbids any of the new funds to be used on toll roads, which are becoming more prevalent — and controversial — in North Texas.

Jay Barksdale, the chamber's senior vice president for public policy, said keeping up with infrastructure needs is vital to support economic development.

"That's a large reason we've been so successful," he said of how the state and region have fared better than most in the past several years.

Scott Haywood, president of Move Texas Forward, said the message voters will send to lawmakers if they pass the proposition could create a ripple effect in favor of TxDOT.

"By hearing from the voters and their constituents, they're more likely to put that at the top of the list and allocate resources to transportation," said Haywood, whose group has a political action committee supporting the proposition.

On top of Proposition 1, Straus said that lawmakers are already looking at a number of ways to steer more funds to TxDOT. A key initiative is to end what are called diversions, the practice of siphoning gas tax revenues away from the state highway fund to pay for agencies like the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The Texas Transportation Commission, whose members are appointed by the governor to oversee TxDOT, approved a legislative agenda last month that supports the end of diversions. State officials estimate TxDOT could garner \$618 million more a year if lawmakers follow through.

The Legislature for decades has used diversions to balance the budget without raising taxes or fees. Eliminating all but a constitutionally mandated diversion to education would be a coup for lawmakers in the 2015 session, Straus said.

"It'll be the first time in 80 years we'll be able to say that," he said.

Straus said DPS will still be funded, even if diversions come to an end. And he's confident that money will be found elsewhere without causing a ripple effect of budget holes.

Lawmakers have an array of other ideas. They include sending the state sales tax on motor vehicle sales to TxDOT. It also includes using sales tax on automobile parts to help fund transportation. But Straus said he's not weighing in on particular ideas yet.

"That's what the session is for," he said.

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Duane Green

1 day ago

Listen up people! Texans need to demand that our lawmakers fund highways adequately. Toll roads are not the answer. #fundtexashighwaysnow

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Drew

1 day ago

Every penny of the gas tax brings in \$150 million. It is currently 20 cents. The TxDot shortfall is \$3 - \$5 billion (depending on Prop 1). That means to cover the shortfall with just gas taxes, we will need to raise the gas tax by 20 - 34 cents.

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Michael Wallace

1 day ago

The amount you suggest would bring us up to speed for the last two decades when ZERO gasoline (or user) taxes were increased. The problem is not a new one, we have avoided this through the Bush and Perry years-----and it will likely continue.

By the way, how long does it take for a toll road to become paid for?

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John O'Neill

15 hours ago

The genius of today's toll road is that they're never for.

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Paula Schlinger

1 day ago

I don't get it. I thought under Rick Perry everything in Texas was ship shape financially. How is it that we have failed to make sure that our roads - a fundamental necessity for commerce - could be so neglected? Of course I guess it isn't too big a surprise; after all, during his many years as governor we have made little progress on planning for water in the future - another necessity of life.

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Jim Schermbeck

1 day ago

Just raise the gasoline tax by 5 cents a gallon and dedicate it. Everyone would complain for a week and then never notice again because of the frequent market fluctuations.

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