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Keep Texas safely trucking

By BROOKE LESLIE ROLLINS

It is a scene all too familiar in Texas, metropolitan regions. Rush hour is at its peak and tensions are high. The traffic report notes an accident ahead involving an 18-wheeler and passenger car.

All around cars and big trucks jockey for position as frustrated commuters dart between slow-starting trucks.

Everyone just wants to get where they are going. Now.

In what might be one of the more rational pieces of legislation filed in the 78th session of the Texas Legislature, State Rep. Glenn Lewis, D-Fort Worth, has come up with a solution notable for its simplicity. In tight fiscal times, it has the added appeal of posing no cost to the state.

Quite simply, Rep. Lewis' legislation would allow the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and Texas Transportation Commission, working with local governments, to designate lanes of roadway exclusively for, or restricted to, the use of large trucks.

Indeed, these lanes have been proven "when used in regions around the nation, including a stretch of I-10 in Houston" to reduce congestion and improve travel times, while decreasing accidents.

Trucks take up 3.8 times the

road space of automobiles, but have less maneuverability and take longer to both accelerate and brake. In the 1990s, Texas' truck traffic increased 48.7 percent while other traffic rose only 26.9 percent.

In the next 20 years, truck traffic could well double.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation's transportation expert, Wendell Cox, has suggested for many years that a low-cost way to reduce traffic congestion is for TxDOT and municipalities to re-examine the interaction between cars and freight trucks on our highways and major thoroughfares.

He found in a 2001 study that the creation of a truck highway around Austin would remove almost 400 million annual truck miles from Interstate 35 in the capitol city.

While Lewis' legislation doesn't take that large of a step, it does pave the way for a great number of innovative, low-cost solutions to the state's future transportation infrastructure needs.

His legislation has already passed out of the House Transportation Committee and will soon head to the House floor for a vote. A Senate version of the bill is in the works.

By simply shifting large freight trucks to a certain lane, or prohibiting them from entering other lanes, traffic flow could well improve overnight.

Average commuters will benefit by seeing their travel times improved, as slow-moving trucks are moved out of the way.

Truckers will give a sigh of relief as they are separated from the often-frustrating, sometimes-dangerous, driving habits of commuters trying to get home or to work.

Everyone benefits as the number of motor vehicle-truck accidents are reduced simply by virtue of limiting the interaction between the two.

Rep. Lewis has found a way to do what is very rare in the legislative arena: Seeing a vexing public problem, he has proposed a solution that costs almost no money, does no damage and provides almost immediate relief. That's the kind of thinking Texas needs.

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