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Criticism jeopardizes Trans-Texas Corridor

Bob Campbell
Staff Writer
Midland Reporter-Telegram

The proposed Trans-Texas Corridor system of "super highways" has become so controversial it may be discarded, a spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation in Austin said Monday.

Addressing 100 people at a Petroleum Club luncheon, Research Fellow Talmadge Heflin said scathing criticism led the 80th Legislature to put a two-year moratorium on projects like the corridor that entail contracts with private companies.

Answering a question from local foundation supporter J. Evetts Haley Jr., Heflin said, "If the waves over Texas about the corridor continue, it will probably meet its demise."

Lawmakers said they were dubious about the corridor's private property impingements and probable high profits for consortium leaders Zachry Construction of San Antonio and the Cintra Corp. of Madrid, Spain.

Heflin, a former 22-year Houston state representative who was chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, praised legislators for ending the session May 28 with a \$7 billion surplus.

He also commended them for thwarting North Texas representatives controlled by the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority who tried to increase the city sales tax ceiling to 10 percent. "We need to keep the sales taxes where they are," said Heflin.

Foundation board member Ernie Angelo opened the event by saying the group's experts not only write good policy but also maximize their influence by disseminating their analyses to the Legislature. "These folks have an impact," Angelo said.

After an invocation by Grace Lutheran Church Pastor Robert Pase, legal analyst Marc Levin said innovations are needed to keep the Texas Department of Criminal Justice from growing by 17,000 inmates by 2012. It currently has about 152,000 inmates in 115 prisons and state jails.

Levin said mediating settlements between criminals and victims of relatively minor offenses and building more "intermediate facilities" would be helpful.

He said Texas has 1,700 criminal laws and could ease the burden by reducing some from felonies to misdemeanors. "Making a mistake in the operation of a grain storage facility is a felony," he said.

Levin said new reforms of the Texas Youth Commission will cut the population of its juvenile reform schools from 4,700 to 3,100, among other improvements.

Education consultant Brooke Terry said legislators did well to replace TAKS performance based testing in high schools with end of course examinations and establish "virtual schools" for rural students and those who work better in private. She said the schools, when operational, will let students take courses not otherwise offered.

Terry said 100,000 children will be added to the Children's Health Insurance Program by new funding and lengthening enrollments from six to 12 months.

She said 60 percent of students who enter the ninth grade in Texas metropolitan areas are dropping out before graduation and many either end up on welfare or in prison.

Foundation President and Vice President Brooke Rollins and Mary Katherine Stout noted their organization is largely supported by private donations. Its other Midland board member is Tim Dunn, who said it is effective because "facts and truth have an impact."

Dunn said lawmakers should have dedicated the surplus to a property tax reduction above the school tax cuts enacted last year.

Wagon Wheel Ranch owner Odis Holiman of Midkiff said mineral rights owners do not adequately compensate surface rights owners for damages done during oil production. "They don't have to negotiate and they don't," he said.