



Legislators' Guide to the Issues

ROADS..... 90

THE ISSUE

For many years now, road congestion in Texas has seemed to become steadily worse. Today, Austin is considered the most congested city of its size in the nation, and the obvious traffic headaches in Houston and Dallas/Fort Worth are even worse. Roadways serving as major freight arteries between cities, such as IH-35, are under increasing pressure as a result of NAFTA and increasing traffic from Texas' sea ports.

Despite growing road demand in Texas, little had been added to the state's road network in recent years. Due to inflation and increasing vehicle fuel efficiency, the purchasing power of the Texas fuel tax has decreased. Construction costs, however, have risen markedly due to increased world demand for cement and steel.

Roads are a valuable commodity and have historically been essentially given away with no direct charge for their use. Fuel taxes have proven a very poor substitute for directly pricing roads. With the passage of HB 3588 in 2003, the Legislature radically departed from past policy. Today, there is a new emphasis on tolling road infrastructure so as to accelerate road projects and provide a long-term funding solution. New contracting methods have also been used. For example, parts of toll roads utilizing new contracting methods in the Austin area are estimated to be completed far ahead of schedule.

The Texas Legislature continues to be subject to pressure to retrench on transportation policy. It is debatable whether regional mobility authorities are the best way to get local input in planning and implementing toll funding strategies. The Trans-Texas Corridor's design and footprint should also be subject to continued discussion. High-cost, non-tolled projects also continue to be constructed in areas with no congestion. What should not be debated, however, is whether to maintain tolling as a principle method of funding roads. Pricing is the best way to allocate any valuable commodity, including roads. To leverage these funds will mean fast congestion relief for Texans.

THE FACTS

- ★ As of 2002, there were 301,778 miles of public roads in Texas—79,493 miles were owned by the state, 142,636 were owned by counties, and 78,653 were owned by municipal authorities.
- ★ Only 12.5 percent of Texans carpool and fewer than 2 percent use public transportation, including taxis.
- ★ The number of vehicle miles traveled per person in Texas in 2000 was 800 miles greater than the national average.
- ★ From 1990 to 2003, the number of lane miles of public road on the Texas state system increased 4 percent while the number of total vehicle miles traveled on the state system increased 52.8 percent.



- ★ In 2001, 22 percent of all Texas road bridges were functionally obsolete or structurally deficient, representing 10,555 structures, more than in any other state.
- ★ Travel delay caused by congestion in Texas increased from 750 million hours in 1982 to 3.6 billion hours in 2000.
- ★ Of the top 50 U.S. foreign trade freight gateways (by value of shipments), eight are in Texas, with four on the Texas/Mexico border.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Stop funding construction projects in areas where congestion is not a problem.
- ★ Convert high-occupancy vehicle lanes to managed (toll) lanes.
- ★ Make greater use of privatization of routine maintenance like the VMS contract in the Waco district.
- ★ Continue to pursue toll road financing for expansion of the state's road network.
- ★ Resist calls to increase state fuel taxes.
- ★ Create incentives for cities to allow the development of private transit services.

RESOURCES

- *Texas Road Policy: Keeping Up With Demand* by Byron Schlomach, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2005) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-02-transportation.pdf>.