

State Agrees to Stop Diverting Highway Construction Money

Nearly \$10 billion diverted since 1987, many blame diversion for the need for toll roads

By Jim Forsyth

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Governor Perry and other state leaders have agreed to bring a halt to the practice which some say has led to toll roads...the diversion of money from the state's highway fund to other projects, 1200 WOAI news reports.

"Implement a plan that sets a definitive course to end the practice of funding the Department of Public Safety with gas taxes that are needed for road construction, and return to funding the DPS with general revenue," is the first goal in a long term transportation funding plan released by Perry, Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst, and House Speaker Tom Craddick.

1200 WOAI news has reported extensively on twenty years of efforts to divert gasoline tax money meant to be used to build roads into not just the DPS but to a string of pork-barrel projects, including construction of roadside historical markers, paving parking lots, and other projects only vaguely connected to transportation. A total of \$9.7 billion has been diverted by greedy lawmakers over the course of the past ten sessions.

The proposals also calls for creation of the Transportation Finance Corporation, which would allow public investment funds, like teacher pension funds, to be invested directly into toll road construction.

Lawmakers would also authorize the appropriation of so called Proposition 12 bonds approved by voters in November.

Proposition 12 bonds would be bonds backed by the state's highway fund which would be used for highway construction.

"Issuing these bonds needs to be a long term set of solutions for solving our state's transportation problem," Tex-DOT's Chris Lippincott said.

Taxpayer advocates praised the commitment to stop diverting highway money.

"It is critical that the diversion of dedicated fuel tax dollars come to a stop," said Justin Keener, Vice President of the libertarian-leaning Texas Public Policy Foundation. "We are pleased to see agreement to fund DPS from general revenue

instead of gas taxes the public expects to be spent on road construction."

But questions were raised about the investment of teachers pension fund money into toll road projects. Some analysts have said that steadily rising gasoline prices, and the cut in driving which those higher prices will continue to cause, will make toll roads less profitable and less desirable in the coming years, especially if alternative types of transportation, like the proposed commuter rail line between San Antonio and Austin, become reality.

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