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Texas Legislature gave local-option funding plan a real thumpin'

It's time for some humility.

The local-option transportation funding bill pushed so hard by this Editorial Board and by Dallas-Fort Worth officials and other leaders failed in the 81st Legislature. And in the words of former president and now Dallas resident George W. Bush, "it was a thumpin'."

Bush uttered those words during a Nov. 8, 2006, news conference acknowledging that his party had lost control of the House and Senate in the previous day's elections. It was a moment of humility from a man who more often showed self-confidence to a fault.

There's room to argue about how the next two years turned out for Bush. But on that day, at least he said the right things, including this: "I've been around politics a long time; I understand when campaigns end, and I know when governing begins."

That's what we, and the others who supported local-option taxes and fees as the best way to resolve dire problems of traffic congestion and dirty air, must do now. We must examine why our plan was thoroughly rejected, notably in the House, and let what we learn guide us.

The legislation was crafted to allow county commissioners to pick the right time for asking voters to approve specific taxes and fees to pay for specific road and rail projects. Still, opponents stopped the effort cold with a classic red herring. They noted the current recession and said, "This is not the time to raise taxes."

Of course it's not, nor did the bill call for immediate elections. But it's not our opponents' fault that the plan was so easily killed; it's ours.

In fact, there are those in Austin who say that hiring a hard-hitting lobby firm and putting such fierce local effort, including editorials in the *Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*, was heavy-handed and helped bring about its demise.

Weaknesses inherent in the legislation were laid bare during the fight. The campaign did not have a good answer to those who said our region should not be asking to raise more money from taxpayers when so many local cities have chosen not to devote available sales taxes to transportation. Only Fort Worth, Blue Mound and Richland Hills belong to the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, while 22 other Tarrant County cities use sales tax money to supplement police department budgets.

There are a lot of good things to be said about using sales tax money for crime fighting, economic development and property tax reduction as many Tarrant County cities do. But those priorities clearly have edged out transportation spending.

Even amid the heated discussions in Austin, Arlington delayed two projects planned for sales tax funding in hope that local-option legislation would pass and money could be obtained through other taxes and fees. That was a shot straight to an exposed foot, and it hurt terribly.

Opponents did not argue the point that Dallas-Fort Worth has severe transportation problems. Traffic congestion helps foul the air and hampers economic development efforts. That will only become worse with time and expected population growth.

Transportation projects take a long time to plan and construct. We have 6.5 million people in our region today, with 3 million more expected during the next 20 years. In some places, we'll need better roads for them. In others, we'll need commuter rail lines to get them off the roads.

If there is to be a next legislative session for the local-option transportation funding plan, regional leaders must spend time re-crafting it to meet the objections that were raised this year. That includes talking with opponents about what went wrong.