

LOCAL NEWS

City to renew push for road bill

Officials seek to boost support for local-option measure that collapsed

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By Lowell Brown / Staff Writer

Denton city officials this week bemoaned the failure of a major road funding bill during a recap of their wins and losses before the Texas Legislature.

The bill would have let Texas counties call elections to increase gasoline taxes or certain fees to pay for local transportation projects. North Texas leaders lobbied heavily for the bill, which they called vital to funding future road and rail projects and easing congestion amid dwindling state and federal aid.

Mayor Pro Tem Pete Kamp, who serves on the North Central Texas Council of Governments' Regional Transportation Council, said local officials already are discussing ways to boost support for the measure during the 2011 legislative session.

They hope to get the public and small-business owners more involved to combat a perception that the measure lacked grass-roots support, Kamp said.

"If indeed they do want to see the projects funded, then we need to let them tell our state legislators," Kamp said in an interview Wednesday, a day after the City Council recounted the bill's collapse during a discussion on the city's state legislative goals.

The Texas Local Option Transportation Act, Senate Bill 855, cleared the Senate but stalled in a House committee. It briefly found new life as an amendment to House Bill 300, an overhaul of the Texas Department of Transportation, but the regular session ended June 1 without action on the bill.

A similar effort backed by North Texas leaders to let voters approve a higher local sales tax to pay for transportation projects died in 2007.

This year, the local-option measure enjoyed backing from local government and business leaders across North Texas, including the cities of Denton and Lewisville, the Denton Chamber of Commerce, Denton County and the Denton County Transportation Authority.

Still, local leaders had trouble gaining support from their state representatives, Kamp said, noting that Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, voted against the measure. Kamp said she hopes more public education can turn the tide.

"I think it was perceived that we were asking our representatives to raise taxes, and we were not," Kamp said. "We were asking them to give local leaders the option to ask our citizens, in an election, to vote on whether they want to fund these projects locally."

In a statement Wednesday, Nelson said she agreed that state funding for transportation must increase.

"However, as other regions added their language to this legislation, it grew into something I could not support," Nelson said. "Also, the people I represent objected to a new menu of taxes and fees in the middle of an economic recession."

Opponents included lawmakers and conservative groups worried about saddling Texans with higher taxes and fees. Before raising taxes, some critics argued, lawmakers should stop diverting money from the state highway fund to projects unrelated to road construction.

In 2007, the Legislature appropriated \$1.95 billion, or 13.8 percent, of highway fund revenue to state agencies other than TxDOT, according to a February report from the House Research Organization, the Legislature's nonpartisan research arm. Most of that funding, \$1.01 billion, went to the Department of Public Safety, according to the report.




A May report from the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation said diversions of highway funds to agencies other than TxDOT rose by more than 150 percent over the past decade. The foundation opposes the diversions.

Denton city leaders say something must be done if residents want to continue seeing new roads built to relieve traffic jams. Otherwise, Texans can expect more toll roads and higher tolls on existing roads, said Snapper Carr, a lobbyist for the city through Austin-based HillCo Partners.

The city pays the lobbying firm about \$80,000 a year to defend its interests before the Legislature.

"TxDOT is not being shy about the fact that they will not have any money for new construction projects after the first quarter of 2012," Carr told council members Tuesday. "They will only be able to barely keep up with the current M&O [maintenance and operations] costs of their facilities. So unless we decide to quit growing as a state, then we probably are going to have to continue to have this debate."

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Denton's Pete Kamp thinks taxpayers should pay to convince themselves and the legislature they should support a tax increase? Unlike some Texas cities, Denton only uses one-half cent of its sales tax for transportation, and diverts the other half-cent towards other government programs (Source: state comptroller's website at www.cpa.state.tx.us). If Kamp thinks transportation is in crisis mode – she can ask voters if they want to re-prioritize existing taxes to address the crisis, rather than asking them to pay more in taxes and simply throw money at a problem. Using taxpayer money to create fake grassroots support will not free anyone from traffic congestion.

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OH PLEASE..WE ALREADY AGREED TO A TAX FOR THE RAIL SYSTEM YEARS AGO THAT NEVER PANNED OUT..NOW OUR CITY WANTS TO TAX US MORE?..HOW ABOUT TAKING A PAY CUT AND USING THE MONEY TO BUILD THE ROADS

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Good thing they DID lose. Otherwise, we would have the Denton 500 constantly voting for new taxes to build

roads, freeways we do not need. Stay vigilant! Be sure to remind your state reps and senators that sensible taxpayers want no more tax increases for roads!!!

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The article pretty well tells the story. DCTA got \$240,000,000.00+ of road money and the lobbest get \$80,000.00 a year from Denton alone. No wonder there is no money to build roads and the city wants more taxes and to be able to blme us for them.

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