

Star-Telegram

Hundreds of millions spent on Texas transportation projects that have little to do with traffic

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No one disputes that the Woodall Rodgers Deck Park under construction in downtown Dallas is innovative.

The 5-acre park is being built on top of an eyesore freeway. Soon, the concrete canyon of a roadway will be covered by an elevated green space where people can walk, ride bikes or play checkers.

But nearly all the money that's being spent on the first phase of construction — \$42.7 million — comes from federal transportation funds, supported largely by gasoline taxes that Americans pay at the pump.

The Woodall Rodgers project is a glaring example of how, at a time when many Texans distrust their transportation leaders, huge chunks of federal and state money are being spent on projects that have little or nothing to do with directly improving traffic.

"Texans should be outraged by it, especially when they're being asked to support tax increases for transportation," said Justin Keener, vice president for policy and communications at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonpartisan research institute in Austin.

The *Star-Telegram* reviewed 515 state projects awarded funds under the federal transportation enhancement program during the past 18 years and found projects large and small that had little to do with mobility.

One reason is that state legislators often require the Texas Department of Transportation to spend its enhancement dollars on pet projects by attaching last-minute "riders" to the department's appropriation.

And federal officials require states to spend 10 percent of transportation funds on enhancement projects to gain access to the other 90 percent for actual road work.

"We didn't ask for them. It's a mandate," said Ted Houghton of El Paso, one of five members of the Texas Transportation Commission, which oversees the Transportation Department.

In Wichita Falls, a project to convert a rail depot to a visitors center was awarded \$267,200 in federal funds, plus a \$53,440 local match. The building now houses an insurance company.

In San Elizario, near El Paso, \$96,000 in federal and local money was set aside to conduct and report on an archaeological dig.

In Fort Worth, a vintage Interurban trolley was restored at a cost of \$211,200. The dapper red rail car, which is parked at 1001 Jones St., doesn't ferry passengers on the city's transit system but instead serves only as a static display, shielded by an iron fence from contact with the public.

Meanwhile, drivers in Dallas-Fort Worth, the nation's fourth-most-congested metro area, are being asked to pay tolls on a growing number of roads and could face higher gas taxes in the coming years to make up for a shortfall of funds to expand highways.

Creating money pools

Texas faces a shortage of \$332 billion through 2030 to meet the needs of its growing population, according to "Funding the Future," a report published in July based on research by the Texas Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations and experts at Texas A&M and the University of Texas at Austin.

Since the federal requirement began, \$997 million worth of work in Texas has been identified as enhancement projects, including more than \$410 million in projects for which the federal government has already provided reimbursement. At least \$269 million more is in the process of being spent, according to a review of state and federal records.

It's difficult to say how much \$997 million would buy if it could be used on highway lane construction instead of enhancements.

It could be enough to pave over 330 miles of rural highways or to expand nearly 250 miles of four-lane interstate highway to six lanes, based on construction estimates from the American Road and Transportation Builders Association. But those figures don't include expenses such as land purchases.

In North Texas, an extra \$997 million might make it unnecessary to include toll lanes or spend federal Recovery Act stimulus funds on a pair of multibillion-dollar projects: the DFW Connector and North Tarrant Express. Another way of looking at it: The \$997 million would be enough to build eight miles of Southwest Parkway from Interstate 30 to Dirks Road — and make it a freeway instead of a toll road as planned.

The DFW Connector, the makeover of Texas 114/121 and other Grapevine highways, is scheduled to begin Feb. 15. The North Tarrant Express, which includes the reconstruction of Loop 820 and Airport Freeway in Northeast Tarrant County, could begin later this year.

"What if the roof of your house was leaking, pipes were breaking, and the government tells you that you have to spend money to buy a fancy piece of art on the wall?" Keener said. "When you're looking at transportation funds going toward historic preservation, landscaping, it doesn't have anything to do with improving traffic on highways."

During a Fort Worth visit late last year, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood wouldn't specify his plans for enhancement funds, but he said his agency is reviewing how money is distributed.

"We're getting out of the sort of mode of business where highways get X amount and transit gets X amount," LaHood said. "We're working with the Department of Housing and Urban Development so we can put transit lines where people really want to live. We're going to try to create pools of money that really integrate with walking and biking trails with some of our highway money."

How we got here

Transportation enhancement funding dates to 1991, when Congress overhauled how highways are paid for.

At the time, states and major cities were under fire for making decades of shortsighted decisions about where to put roads, resulting in sprawling suburban areas stretching farther from the urban core. The problem was often compounded when lanes were added to monolithic highways as planners tried to keep up with population growth.

To promote a more holistic approach to transportation planning, Congress directed the states to spend 10 percent of their federal surface transportation funds on what are called transportation enhancements. The idea was to promote a mix of uses, including hike-and-bike trails, landscaping, historic preservation, and access to rail and mass transit. States were left to pick the projects themselves, build them according to federal guidelines and seek reimbursement from a federal fund that has made \$9.5 billion available nationwide since 1991.

The 10 percent requirement for enhancements did not apply to all transportation funds. Congressional earmarks and maintenance funds, for example, were not figured into the ratio.

Politics as usual

As is often the case, politicians got involved in the project selection process for enhancement funds and began directing where to spend the money.

At the end of the 2009 legislative session, for example, lawmakers ordered the Texas Transportation Department to spend its enhancement funds on projects of dubious benefit to the state's transportation system:

- \$16.1 million for the Battleship Texas restoration project in La Porte.
- \$2 million for a Houston fire museum.
- \$455,000 for beautification of the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.
- \$150,000 on a Lufkin tourist center.

Even more enhancement funds will likely become available when Congress reauthorizes funding. A vote on that bill, which could total \$500 billion over five or six years — a 38 percent increase from the last authorization, in 2005 — may come later this year.

Enhancement funds, like earmarks, have become a way for federal and state elected officials to prove to constituents that they can bring home the bacon, critics say.

About \$20.4 million has been spent renovating 21 county courthouses in Texas, including \$3.6 million for the Hill County Courthouse, which was gutted by fire in 1993.

It's up to lawmakers working on the state Transportation Department's two-year budget to determine whether such projects are an appropriate use of transportation funds, said Steven Polunsky, director of the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee. Some projects are added during open meetings, while others are tacked on in the final hours of a legislative session as lawmakers scramble to gain approval for projects they support.

And add \$9 million or so more in gas-tax-supported funds for projects benefiting those who prefer to travel in the sky — \$8.7 million for the Frontiers of Flight Museum at Dallas Love Field and \$138,000 for the Hangar 25 Air Museum in Big Spring.

Defending Woodall Rodgers

In Tarrant County, more than \$35 million was awarded to hike-and-bike-trail projects in Arlington, Colleyville, Euless, Fort Worth,

Grapevine, Keller, North Richland Hills and even Burleson near the Tarrant-Johnson county border.

In North Richland Hills, \$2 million was awarded in 1999 to the Walker's Creek Park trail project, which included installing lockers under a large canopy near the city's water park, for bicycle commuters to stow their belongings. But a few months ago, the lockers were removed, and now they're sitting in a storage facility, said Bill Thornton, assistant parks and recreation director.

"We were concerned that you couldn't see inside, and you could have someone stuck in a locker," he said, adding that the city intends to retrofit the lockers with safer doors and locks and put them back out on the trail.

In Arlington, \$102,479 was awarded in 1994 for median landscaping on Six Flags Drive, just outside the theme park entrance.

Supporters of the Woodall Rodgers Deck Park note that plenty of other funds are committed to the project beyond the \$42.7 million in enhancements used to finish the first phase by 2012. Besides the original \$25 million in traditional enhancements committed to the project since 2007, the federal government chipped in \$16.7 million in Recovery Act stimulus funds last year to get the shovels turning. And \$40 million more in private and local contributions are expected to cover the costs of phase two.

"That's big bang for the buck, and it's transportation-related," said Amanda Wilson, spokeswoman for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

In North Texas, the emphasis is on using transportation funds for trails and access to rail, officials said. In rural parts of the state, more than \$172 million has been spent to overhaul 23 highway rest areas.

Houghton, from the Texas Transportation Commission, foresees a day when federal transit money is awarded to states in block grants, not reimbursements, to be spent as states see fit within federal guidelines.

But he isn't convinced a change like that will happen soon. "It's not sexy enough for the electorate to say, 'Stop!' It's not education. It's not healthcare," Houghton said.

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