

## Justin Keener: New taxes, old politics will not fix traffic

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Texans are tired of sitting in traffic, and elected officials have a choice. They can continue to pass the buck by offering only new taxes and greater spending for pet projects that won't relieve congestion.

Or they can do the hard work we expect of them by reprioritizing existing taxes and demanding greater accountability and transparency in transportation spending.

For much of the past decade, many North [Texas](#) officials sought billions in new taxes and fees for the expansion of rail transit.

Using taxpayer dollars, they hired lobbyists to talk up lawmakers, retained public relations firms to develop "Astroturf" campaigns, and hosted countless receptions and meals for public officials and their staffs.

They employed the well-established political tactic of marginalizing critics by claiming anyone against new taxes was spreading misinformation. A Feb. 9 column in this newspaper even labeled critics as "anti-government demagogues, masquerading as conservatives."

These tactics sound similar to those employed in Washington to railroad unpopular federal legislation.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation has offered research-based solutions that do not rely on increasing taxes. These recommendations were presented publicly to [Senate](#) and House committees during last year's legislative session. Instead, legislators pursued measures that would have enabled the creation of more than \$20 billion in new taxes and fees.

Just as taxpayers are responding to Washington's take-no-prisoners approach, they also sent Austin a message: no new taxes. Lawmakers listened and rejected the transit taxes.

In preparation for the 2011 legislative session, North Texas leaders could choose to keep pushing for billions in new taxes in the face of mounting public opposition – as evident in a recent [Dallas Morning News](#) poll – or harness public sentiment to repair the transportation system before it is totally broken.

Repairing the system begins with restoring public trust.

Step 1 is ending the diversion of billions in fuel tax dollars to non-transportation projects. Doing so won't magically free us from gridlock, but it is long overdue.

The state should also prioritize "enhancement" funds, which come from Texas' share of federal gas taxes, for improving safety and reducing congestion rather than the historic preservation and public art mandated by [Congress](#). Cities and counties offer matching dollars for these projects, further diverting funds from mobility improvements.

Step 2 is increasing transparency. State agencies post their check registers and budgets online; every toll authority, metropolitan planning organization and transit authority should do likewise. This will increase public confidence while reducing opportunities for fraud, waste and corruption.

Step 3 is establishing an accountability system. Just as education money should be spent on classroom instruction rather than palatial facilities, transportation dollars should be tied to congestion relief rather than high-profile pet projects. This includes a close examination of local transportation providers, such as DART, that are spending more than a billion of local, state and federal tax dollars every year.

Step 4 is prioritizing government spending. In each fiscal year between 1996 and 2008, the city of Dallas outspent the growth in population plus inflation. Tarrant County's spending from fiscal 1999 to fiscal 2008 nearly doubled, from \$242.7 million to \$461.3 million, while their growth in population plus inflation was barely half that.

If local leaders believe transportation is a priority, they must tighten their belts and fund what matters most, rather than running to Austin for a state bailout in the form of new taxing authority.

Cities also have the ability to levy a 1-cent sales tax for transportation, but most use it for other purposes. More than \$300 million a year could eventually be realized for transportation in North Texas – without a tax increase – if voters were allowed to reprioritize the taxes they already pay.

Taxpayers know that the premise that new taxes are the only answer is false. These recommendations represent a fiscally responsible plan to fix our transportation system.

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