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Frontlines: Rhetoric won't solve our traffic congestion

Special legislative session should bring back the local-option bill that failed to get debated on House floor

By Vicki Truitt Contributing writer

During the 81st regular session of the Texas Legislature an all-out push was made to give voters in urban areas the right to vote on whether to fund specific transportation infrastructure projects with specific fees or an increased gas tax, or both. This effort was called the Texas Local Option Transportation Act, and Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, and I spearheaded it. Although I am convinced that we had enough votes to pass the measure in the House, the bill was never debated on the floor.

Hundreds of North Texans came to Austin during the last week of May to support the bill and to urge the House to pass it. I am grateful for their support, and I know their disappointment over the failed measure. North Texas and other traffic-choked areas in this state are desperate for relief. We're not asking the entire state to solve our problem. We simply want the right of self-determination. We want the right to pick our poison-stifling traffic or a few bucks out of our pocket to move people and goods, and clear our air of pollution from stalled traffic.

Certain conservative groups insist that we stop "diversions" before we consider any new transportation funding mechanisms. I'm all for it, but stopping all diversion of transportation funds helps solve only about half the statewide problem — and that's only for road funding. It does nothing to address mass transit needs. And the hole it would create in the state's general budget would take more than a decade to fill during good economic times because it requires taking money from other budget items, which still must be funded — the state's Department of Public Safety, for example.

Others want cities with no sales tax committed to transportation to help fund transit before new funding sources are contemplated. Some cities may be able to do that, but for most cities in traffic-laden areas, sales tax money is already committed for years into the future to pay for bonding obligations. Is it wise to wait for 20 years to act when we know it can take up to 10 years to complete a major highway project?

For those who believe the tax options from which voters would choose may be too difficult for low-income families, we learned that the proposal would be less burdensome on a family than one penny of sales tax.

Some said that rather than holding a countywide election, a vote should be taken city by city. Our North Texas view must be broader than that. We need a seamless, "regional" transit system for the major metropolitan area, and cities determining whether they're in or out would subject the goal of a seamless system to having too many doughnut holes, or lack of continuity.

Irresponsible naysayers

"No toll roads," said (mostly rural) people who testified in committee. "No taxes," said others. Well I don't like taxes, fees or tolls, but ignoring our transportation infrastructure problems in urban areas is irresponsible. Transportation infrastructure requires money to build, and the Texas Department of Transportation will be out of money for new construction projects by the first quarter of 2012 unless a new funding source is found.

The local-option bill did not pass because it fell victim to parliamentary delays orchestrated by the Democrats to defeat the voter ID bill in the House, delays it encountered in the House Transportation Committee and the misrepresentation of the bill by certain conservative activists.

Gov. Rick Perry has called a special session to address a number of important issues. Transportation is one key issue that needs to be addressed — especially for North Texans. I hope Gov. Perry has included transportation in the call for an upcoming special session. He has said several times that he could support a local-option bill for North Texas. Here's his chance.

North Texans expect solutions from their state government. For the last six years, local leaders have been working on ideas and formulating options to solve our transportation and mobility problems. Thus far, the Legislature has rejected these ideas. If the local-option bill is not the answer, then what is?

This I know — rhetoric does not solve problems. Texas needs leaders who are not afraid to tackle problems head-on. The Texas Legislature and state leadership are failing the people who live in traffic-choked regions.

This area is home to 25% of the state's population and 27% of the state's jobs. If we don't act soon, our traffic problem will harm business and our economy. Chamber executives and economic development specialists tell me it already is. And as North Texas goes, so goes the state.

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