

House delivers blow to effort for local decisions on taxes to fund road projects

07:09 AM CDT on Thursday, May 28, 2009

By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER / The Dallas Morning News

A House vote Wednesday may dash North Texas leaders' hopes to come out of the 2009 Legislature with authority for counties to seek voter approval for higher taxes to pay for road projects.

The House voted 84-59 to urge rejection of any compromise with the Senate that would include the local-option tax proposal, a controversial measure that has emerged as one of the divisive transportation issues of the session. It is also the top priority for North Texas lawmakers and enjoys strong support in the Senate. The Senate and House have each passed versions of a giant transportation bill and must agree to a final approach by the end of the weekend, when it will go back to each chamber for an up-or-down vote.

Only the Senate version contains the tax proposal.

The tax measure never made it to the House floor, and its support there has been in question all along. The House named five negotiators Wednesday to begin efforts with Senate counterparts to settle on a single version of the massive transportation bill, whose approval state and local officials say is essential.

One of the negotiators is Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving, who said last week that the tax proposal was likely to be unacceptable to the House.

The vote Wednesday was to urge the five negotiators to reject the tax proposal, no matter how important it is to the Senate. The resolution is nonbinding and is designed to strengthen House representatives' hands in the negotiations.

But it nevertheless underscores how strongly the House opposes the tax proposal.

The resolution was bitterly opposed by Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller.

"Other than what you have seen in blast e-mails, which are full of half-truths, this House has not had the chance to consider the facts," she told her colleagues. "More particularly, you have not heard the voters in my district complain about their daily traffic nightmare."

But Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, the transportation committee chairman, said the House needed to send the Senate a strong message. The larger transportation bill, he said, is too important to die because of House opposition to the tax proposal.

"If we come out with an agreement on 99 percent of the issues before the House and the Senate, but with a bill that includes the local-option tax, my personal fear is that the majority of this membership might not vote to pass the bill at all."