

Former Perry aide Delisi derides Hutchison over toll road plan

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If U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison doesn't like how Gov. Rick Perry and the state transportation department are building highways, then she should come up with a better idea, the state's top transportation official – and former Perry aide – said Wednesday.

Deirdre Delisi, Perry's former chief of staff whom he tapped last year to oversee the 13,000-employee transportation agency, defended one of her old boss's most controversial legacies – his push for private toll roads – as necessary if Texas is to build the roads its growing population requires.

And in an interview after her speech to a transportation conference in Irving, she hit back at Hutchison's criticisms of Perry and the department.

Every day this week, staffers from Hutchison's campaign to end Perry's record-setting run as governor have hammered him and his efforts to crisscross Texas with 1,500 miles of highways and rail, part of a mostly defunct project known as the Trans Texas Corridor.

That project was killed last year, but remnants remain and Hutchison's campaign has called it an example of monstrously bad judgment on Perry's part.

The senator, who is set to formally announce her campaign Monday, "needs to bring some proposals, and I mean real ones," Delisi said in an interview. "What are her big ideas? ... She has said that she wants to take Texas out of the federal highway program. Well, that is not going to happen. She knows that: She said it wouldn't pass at the time she filed the bill. So filing a bill you know won't pass is not a solution. What else does she propose?"

Hutchison filed federal legislation this spring that would have allowed Texas to keep federal gas taxes it collects here. But the bill went nowhere.

A departure

Since her appointment last year, Delisi has been given positive marks by many for tamping down the politically charged rhetoric that was common under her predecessor, Ric Williamson.

So her comments Wednesday about Hutchison, and her forceful defense of private toll roads in general, were a departure.

They also were highly out of order, said a former Hutchison aide who has clashed with Delisi before.

Matt Mackowiak, who quit as Hutchison's Washington spokesman two months ago to launch a career as a political strategist, said Delisi should never have called out the state's senior senator.

"It's entirely inappropriate," Mackowiak said. "Deirdre Delisi is a political operative," and is too close to the governor to offer the kind of objective opinion Texans should expect from those charged with leading its agencies.

On Friday, Hutchison will address the same forum Delisi spoke to Wednesday. A senior aide said she will lash out again at the corridor project, and continue to propose that Texas be allowed to withdraw from the federal highway system.

Hutchison campaign spokesman Jeff Sadosky said Perry refuses to say whether he still supports the corridor. Citing recent remarks by Perry that the Legislature had killed the plan, Sadosky accused Perry of hiding the fact that he continues to support the controversial measure.

"Rick Perry has absolutely no problem misrepresenting his record and trying to rewrite his own history to suit his political needs today," he said this week.

Perry is in Israel, and unable to be reached, spokeswoman Allison Castle said.

Support for both

But far from shying away from the corridor and private toll roads, Delisi said Wednesday that her department continues to support both, even though most legal authority for private toll deals will expire next month. Lawmakers will discuss renewing that authority in 2011.

Meanwhile, Delisi said the commission will support private toll roads wherever it can.

One such place is in South Texas, and on a segment of the Trans Texas Corridor that remains active.

A \$5 million design contract with a private toll developer recently cleared hurdles in Austin, and work will begin soon on a plan to patch together private toll roads and free roads south of Corpus Christi, Delisi said.

First leg

To make the project work, the state is working with Corpus Christi officials to create an entity akin to the North Texas Tollway Authority. The idea is to use revenues from the

higher-traffic roads in Corpus Christi to enable the private firm to pay for the construction of free segments of the highway in rural areas south of the city.

"It's going to be the first leg of [the long-proposed] I-69," Delisi said. "How else is it going to get built? That has been a federal project for 25 years. [Hutchison] has been in Washington, what has she done to make that project move, besides announcing \$5 million for an earmark here or there? That's like using a water gun to put out a four-alarm fire."

Hutchison's campaign declined to address Delisi's complaints about her efforts on I-69, but said her comments encapsulate Perry's overly political approach to government. Meanwhile, Delisi said her old boss is relishing the campaign.

"He loves this," she said. "It energizes him. It's what he wants to do. He is enjoying it."