

Editorial: Beast of a TxDOT reform bill

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Someone call the grownups in the state Capitol. Members of the House have made a mess, and it looks like they've left it to the Senate to clean up.

Lawmakers who had been itching to take their licks at the Texas Department of Transportation got their chance, with a House bill aimed at tightening up the agency's governance. But things got out of hand, and by the time lawmakers were done this week, their handiwork was an example of how not to govern.

One member called the bill "sloppy and mob-driven."

Exhibit A is the notion to abolish the five-person Transportation Commission, one of dozens of governor-appointed boards that run state government. As brought to the House, the TxDOT bill kept the commission but shortened its leash by giving lawmakers more control of appointments. That proposal would have been fine.

But that didn't satisfy anti-TxDOT zealots, who might have been driven by anger at toll roads or Gov. Rick Perry's interest in privatization. Or maybe they were tired of complaints from back home that highways aren't getting built fast enough.

Whatever, the House overwhelmingly backed the idea to wipe out the commission in favor of a single new, elected state highway commissioner. What an awful mix – a highway czar, political contributions, campaign promises of new roads.

The House was on a roll. Members added 14 more elected transportation commissioners, to be chosen from districts that have yet to be drawn. The amendment's author said he was not wedded to 14 districts, but no one seemed interested in debating the number, so 14 it was.

Wait. There's more – including a new "legislative oversight committee," which could hire its own staff and outside consultants to tell the new elected officials how to be more efficient. Why do we doubt that multiplying government and adding politics will do better in stretching pitifully thin state highway dollars?

The House also couldn't help itself from meddling in local affairs. Members overwhelmingly gave in to a call to bar cities from installing new red-light cameras and to phase out current ones.

Cities statewide have installed these enforcement systems since the Legislature opened the door to them six years ago, and their data show deadly accidents on the wane. Undeterred, House members rattled off their own statistics and declared monitored

intersections as Big Brother-ish failures. Thus, a valuable safety tool ended up in the ditch.

Bitterness at toll roads popped up like springtime dandelions through 203 bill amendments over three days. The House ultimately reined in a useful toll-road financing method used in North Texas, but only after agreeing to politically convenient exceptions for projects in different members' districts.

TxDOT has plenty of faults and, like any level of government, needs to constantly work to improve accountability.

Passage of the TxDOT bill may give self-styled reformers the ability to claim victory. But whether lawmakers admit it or not, inadequate highway funding is at the root of their anger. It's the reason toll roads have proliferated and constituents are steamed. The sooner lawmakers reckon with that the closer Texas gets to clear-headed lawmaking.