

## S-T report: Since 1991, \$1 billion for 'enhancements' as Texas traffic worsened



5:45 AM Mon, Jan 25, 2010 | [Permalink](#) | [Yahoo! Buzz](#)

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Those of you who read our west-side competitor from time to time, may have seen a **big-picture piece** on Sunday by Star-Telegram transportation writer Gordon Dickson. If you missed it, it is worth a read.

He points out that since 1991, federal requirements that states spend an amount equal to about 10 percent of their building programs on so-called "enhancement" has meant that hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on projects that often have very little direct connection with the transportation crisis state and local leaders keep reminding us we're in.

Exhibit A in his article is the **Woodall Rodgers deck park** in downtown Dallas, but he cites examples from across Texas.

Justin Keener of the Texas Public Policy Foundation in Austin invites us to be outraged. And it's hard not to be fired up, when you realize how our leaders keep telling us we need more and more money for worse and worse traffic in Texas. And when you realize how many toll roads are being built as a result of said money woes.

But it is a debate with many sides, and I invite you to read the piece, and make your own conclusions. Meanwhile I think it's important to consider it with a bit of perspective. Follow me to the jump, and we'll talk about it.

\* Dickson says the \$997 million could be used to make the Southwest Parkway a free road, rather a toll road -- and he's right, if the entire stack of money had been stockpiled since 1991 and left untouched, until the Tarrant County project came along and convinced every other county in Texas that it was so worthwhile it should get all of the money.

But of course, that \$997 million in projects were identified over 18 years, and were spread out throughout the State. A billion dollars over 18 years is only about \$55 million a year. Distributed throughout Texas, it wouldn't go far in ending the traffic jams the piece suggests we'd be better off focusing on, rather than the enhancements.

You can do a lot of small things for \$15 million in a year -- or whatever our precise share would be - - but you wouldn't be able to come anywhere close to doing a single big thing with that kind of money.

\* The enhancement projects, though some look outrageous, include a lot of other projects that many folks would argue really do enhance our efforts to get around. Connecting a bike trail to a rail station may seem like small potatoes -- and it is -- but for a region that is trying to get more cars off the streets, it might make sense to spend a little money on things like that.

Still, the examples Dickson cited include some stinkers, and he also notes that many of the worst examples come as a result of the Legislature essentially ear-marking pet projects late in the budget process. From where I sit, I think that's provocative, and worth further investigation.

Finally, it wouldn't make sense to end this blog post without harking back to one from earlier this month, in which I reported that the Obama Administration has begun to change the way the federal government will consider applications for major transit grants.

The administration will lessen the role cost-effectiveness, and that of a project's impact on suburban commuters, in determining which projects will be funded. Like the congressional authors of the enhancement set-asides back in 1991, the new approach attempts to strike a more holistic approach to funding transit.

You can bet that projects that have small impact on congestion -- such a downtown street cars -- will be given more consideration.

Is that a good thing? It depends on what you think we ought to be spending our gas tax money on. And as always, that's a reliable recipe for a good debate.

I'm anxious to hear what you guys think. Rodger? Readers? Let's hear it.