

Whole shebang on transportation out of Austin



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In bits and pieces, my colleagues Michael Lindenberger, the DMN Austin Bureau and I have covered the landscape on transportation-related bills in Austin. Here's a compilation of those -- and other -- measures that lived and died before the session ended on Monday. (Pardon the editorial comments, but that's what I do.)

TxDOT sunset - Bill to remake the highway dept froze dead in its tracks under **threat from Sen. John Carona**, who was incensed that members stripped out the local-option plan that was so badly wanted by North Texas leaders. He and Rep. Vicki Truitt worked on it tirelessly. (**It was an outrage** that this region can't put transportation improvements up to a vote. Aside from that, the House made too much of a **mess of the TxDOT bill** to make it worth crying over.)

With sunset all these other provisions died:

- Weakening of **red-light camera programs** - Violators could have escaped a fine and opted to take a safety course. (Glad that it died. Cameras save lives. I don't even begin to get why opponents can't respect the data or local control.)
- Irving Orange Line - **Linda Harper-Brown** slipped in a provision that would have forced DART to route its Irving rail line directly to D/FW International Airport, instead of first hooking in to the more northerly Cotton Belt line. (The Legislature has no business telling DART how to run a railroad. Harper-Brown needs to take this fight to the right venue.)
- Prop 12 bonds - TxDOT lost greater borrowing authority to go more into hock to build roads. (Carona warns about TxDOT debt piling up; I'm inclined to believe him.)
- Up-front CDA payments: Would have barred them. (North Texas is sitting pretty with highway construction funds, thanks to concession payment required of NTTA. Don't see why Cintra, say, shouldn't have to pay up to operate a toll road, thereby accepting the risk. NTTA may be thinking twice about the sum it paid for SH 121.)
- Snuffing of Trans-Texas Corridor: Would have obliterated any hint of such a thing in TxDOT's planning portfolio. (Lawmakers just won't let some things go.)
- "Choose Life" license plates: Would have added this specialty plate to the long list of choices now available, with a cut of the premium going to charity. (I'm pro-life and might have bought one.)

TxDOT, Etc.

- New Department of Motor Vehicles: New agency's duties taken out of TxDOT, so both can focus on primary, distinctly different duties. A sunset recommendation (Good idea.)
- Towing regulation: Licensing simplified for tower/impounder companies. (Carona)
- Salvage companies: Regulation moved from TxDOT to licensing department. (Better agency focus. Carona again.)
- Registration fees, process: The fee schedule is simpler. (Anything that will expedite bureaucracy. Now if lawmakers can fix things so we can get our cars re-registered every year at the same time we get them re-inspected.)

Transportation finance

- Indexing: Lawmakers rejected different provisions that would have automatically increased the 20-cent fuel tax based on a price index. (Revenue should keep up with rising costs. It hasn't been.)
- Straight tax increase: Carona had favored it, but abandoned the idea early in the session for lack of support. (**Why do politicians freak out about a nickel or dime bump in the fuel tax but keep quiet about the huge, cumulative hit that tolls take on everyday drivers? Freezing the fuel tax forces construction of tollways everywhere.**)
- Ending diversions: Lawmakers refused to go for a mandatory, constitutionally enforced end to the practice of siphoning off gas taxes from the highway fund. (Leaders backed off their pledge and, in fact, increased some diversions.)
- CDA overhaul: Sen. Robert Nichols' big bill died. Would have reined in public-private tollways more. Many provisions had been in TxDOT sunset. (Life goes on.)

Roadway safety

- Sobriety checkpoints: Various measures fizzled out. (I think the inconvenience of the checkpoints could have done some good.)
- **Eric's Law**: Provides stiffer punishment for uninsured, unlicensed at-fault drivers who cause pain and suffering. (Good for Allen Vaught. He took up the matter after an accident that caused debilitating injuries to our DMN colleague Eric Nelson, who's made a remarkable recovery.)
- Motorcycle safety: Applicants for a motorcycle operator license must take training course. Automobile safety courses must cover need to yield to motorcycles. (Good ideas from Carona.)
- Cell phones in school zones: Drivers can't use them. (Branch/Carona. Yeah.)
- Red-light money: Carona fixed an oversight to make sure the state's cut of red-light fines goes to locals. Lawmakers two years ago overlooked their promise to send the money to trauma centers. (No-brainer.)

Railroads/rail transit

- New rail division at TxDOT: The agency now can develop and implement a state passenger rail plan, tying together various entities. The department can pursue federal funds, including stimulus bucks for high-speed rail. (Carona, naturally. Aggressive rail planning is overdue.)
- Rail relocation: The budget includes \$182 million for a rail relocation fund, representing the first dollars in the kitty since it was approved by voters in 2005. The money helps move freight rail lines from the middle of cities where it snarls traffic. It also will help solve a monstrous rail jam, called Tower 55, in Fort Worth. (It was past time that lawmakers put money where their mouths were four years ago.)
- DART borrowing authority: The agency got an immediate change in law so it can put up its hardware as a first lien for bondholders, instead of current law that gives first-lien status for operating expenses. (**DART will need more money flow to build unfunded components of the rail blueprint.** Yikes, it's expensive. Linda Harper-Brown could have helped raise some of that critical money by backing local option. If Irving never gets the expensive but unfunded BNSF line to Frisco, she should share the blame.)

NOTE: Most of the above bills are pending the governor's signature. Thanks to Carona's staff at Senate Transportation and Homeland Security, and others, for helping with the rundown.

Readers, please send along any oversights you see here.
