

El Paso Times

Joe Pickett: TxDOT is open for business, El Paso's in good position to gain from it

By Joe Pickett / Guest columnist

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After 140 days and 11 hours of floor debate in the House on the Texas Department of Transportation sunset bill, it died. Why? No political will to really make a change, the bill was held hostage, selfishly, to try and get a local option gas tax included.

I personally supported the local option, but it was not supported by a majority of the House, effectively killing the bill. Additionally, the sunset process attracted more than 200 additional amendments, thus creating an omnibus bill with complex provisions causing a majority of members to feel uneasy as to their final effect.

The sunset bill had nothing to do with money, except for language outlining how \$5 billion in Proposition 12 bonds could be issued. We may hear more about this in a fast, down and dirty special session.

So what is left, what passed, what next?

What is left are many important transportation bills. The Sunset Commission recommended and our committee passed the creation of a new state agency. The new agency will be dedicated solely to the titling and registration of 21 million vehicles in the state of Texas. This should give TxDOT fewer responsibilities in this area and more time to focus on building and maintaining roads.

Foreign commercial motor vehicle carriers previously using NAFTA to circumvent the titling, registering and insuring of certain vehicles engaged in cross-border cargo operations must now register and license those vehicles.

Big fleet operators now have a way to easily register

hundreds of vehicles, electronically and for multiple years, all at once, saving them time and making more revenue for the State Highway Fund.É

TxDOT now has the ability to establish advisory committees. These committees could be extremely helpful on issues that come up between sessions and when extra attention needs to be given to an area of expertise within the agency.

A hot topic for many has been TxDOT spending your highway funds for promoting of toll projects.ÉThe agency is now prohibited in marketing and advertising activities to influence public opinion about the use of toll roads and use of tolls as a financing mechanism.

TxDOT can no longer pledge or encumber money in the state highway fund to guarantee a loan obtained by a public or private entity for development for a toll project. This keeps our cash intact to spend on congestion, safety and maintenance projects.

SB 970 removes the requirement that the executive director of TxDOT be an engineer. It has been thought for a long time that requiring the executive director to be an engineer has limited the agency from hiring a true CEO type with the ability to run a multibillion dollar business.

What next? The governor will call a special session. It probably will be short and sweet. I anticipate three issues. One will be the extension of existence for several state agencies, including TxDOT. Two, language needs to be passed stating how the Proposition 12 bonds, worth \$5 billion, will be spent and, lastly, the probable extension of Comprehensive Development Agreements (CDA), for the development of public private road construction.

El Paso is and will continue to be in a good position. We received \$96 million in stimulus dollars for improvements to Loop 375, additional maintenance dollars and our billion-dollar improvement plan will go forward. We are receiving approximately \$15 million for two major and two minor safety improvement projects that are an additional benefit to our community.

All in all better, than what we have seen in the past.

State Rep. Joe C. Pickett, D-El Paso, represents District 79 in the Texas House of Representatives.