

TOP STORY

Deep cuts could be in store for TxDOT

BY LESLIE WIMMER

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By the first quarter of 2012, the Texas Department of Transportation's expenditures may be higher than its expected revenue.

As a result, state transportation officials may have to make deep cuts in TxDOT's maintenance program in order to fund new projects, according to a letter from Deirdre Delisi, chair of the Texas Transportation Commission, to state Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas. Carona is chairman of the State Senate's Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security.

The maintenance cuts would be a result of rapidly declining transportation funds, including funds from the state's motor fuels tax, the Texas Mobility Fund, Proposition 14 bonds and Comprehensive Development Agreements.

In the letter, Delisi states the Texas Department of Transportation's ability to finance new construction projects will only be possible if severe cuts are made in the department's maintenance program.

"We're coming close to running out of new money for projects, so it's conceivable, unless there's some new revenue source, that there won't be any new projects after that point," said Bill Meadows, commissioner of the Texas Transportation Commission. "The traditional funding sources that we have used in Texas to address our transportation infrastructure needs

are not anywhere near adequate to address the demand, that's the bottom line."

Texas' main source for transportation funding is the state's gas tax, which hasn't changed since the early 1990s, Meadows said.

The current tax sits at about 20 cents per gallon for both gasoline and diesel fuel, according to the comptroller's Web site.

When gas prices skyrocketed in 2008, drivers started using public transportation and other means of commuting, which caused a dip in the state's gas tax revenue, Meadows said. Also, drivers are using more fuel-efficient vehicles than they were in the 1990s, which require fewer fill-ups and send less money to the state's transportation fund.

Another issue working against transportation funding is diversions, which take money from the transportation fund and go toward the state's education fund and to the Department of Public Safety, officials say.

Several bills in the current legislature aim to fix problems associated with transportation funding, including Carona's Senate Bill 1350, which the Senate passed April 28.

The bill would create a state infrastructure bank funded with money from Proposition 12.

"What the bank would do is make loans to toll authorities and regional mobility authorities on projects where toll revenue doesn't support the capital costs," Meadows said. "This would enable the state to make a loan to, say, NTTA and the NTTA could advance projects faster."

Senate Bill 1350 is one approach to helping statewide transportation funding issues, but it won't solve all the problems, said Steve Polunsky, spokesman for Carona.

Other bills in the legislature include efforts to stop diversions, and the Texas Local Option Transportation Act, which would give county voters the option of choosing to take on various taxes and fees to pay for transportation projects in their counties.

In North Texas, area transportation officials have agreed on a set of funding options voters can take on including a new resident impact fee, a vehicle registration fee, an additional motor fuels tax and a drivers license fee.

Other issues affecting transportation funding are timing and reluctance on the part of both legislators and taxpayers to support raising taxes to put more money into the state's transportation fund, officials say.

“There is absolutely no incentive for a legislator to say ‘we want higher taxes,’” said Jim Riddlesperger, a political science professor at Texas Christian University. “The surest way to fail in politics is to promise people what they don't want, so you'd never hear a legislator do that.”

But Polunsky said he and others in Austin have consistently heard taxpayers say they are willing to take on more taxes to fix mobility issues.

“You will get people who are against everything, and they tend to be vocal and show up, but we've consistently had people come to say ‘I am willing to pay an increased gas tax if it will get me where I need to go in a reasonable time,’” Polunsky

said. “And that has been homeowners, business people, elected officials both Republican and Democrat, there has been no shortage of people saying this is the best policy to be implemented.

“But, it should be done in conjunction with reducing diversions and making TxDOT more efficient and making our transportation entities more efficient,” he said. “We’ve heard public support so far, and so far Sen. Carona has been unable to assure his colleagues of the existence of that support. But, it’s there.”

Also, the projected timing of maintenance cuts, early 2012, means legislators are more likely to work on the issue in the next legislative session, Riddlesperger said.

“In terms of government planning, 2012 is a long ways away,” he said. “There’s going to be another legislative session between now and then, so the notion that there’s something urgent with TxDOT, that’s important, but it’s probably not really on the radar of the legislature at least right now because they’re dealing with more immediate crises.”