

## TEXAS LEGISLATURE

# North Texans revive push for local-option transportation funding bill

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AUSTIN -- Undaunted by failure in the last two legislative sessions, North Texas leaders are organizing another push behind a local-option transportation bill that would authorize local elections to finance millions of dollars in road and rail projects.

Officials from Fort Worth, Dallas and Arlington signaled their intentions at a joint hearing before the state House and Senate transportation committees Monday, saying that congestion and pollution have only worsened since a similar bill died in the closing days of the 2009 Legislature.

"We in North Texas are facing nothing less than a mobility crisis," said Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief. "North Texas needs your help. The people of Fort Worth need your help."

The legislative initiative being prepared for the 2011 Legislature would allow county or regional elections in which voters would choose from a menu of funding options, such as an increase in gasoline taxes or auto registration fees, Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan said in outlining the plan after the hearing.

Jordan said proponents are tailoring the local-option feature for use in any region and plan to mount a statewide push on behalf of the bill.

In another key difference from the previous campaign, Jordan said, proponent cities will rely on help from business groups instead of tax-financed city funds to pay for lobbying efforts for the bill.

The measure is similar in concept to the 2009 bill, which Gov. Rick Perry and vocal conservative groups denounced as a tax increase. But Jordan said supporters will stress that urban residents are already paying millions of dollars in "hidden taxes," such as lost productivity and increased business costs, because of traffic congestion.

Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck, a physician, told lawmakers that proponents will also cite the public-health benefits of reducing traffic. He pointed out that pollution in the Metroplex carries the same consequences as smoking and exacerbates pulmonary illnesses.

"As we get more and more cars off the street, the amount of asthma that we see will go down dramatically," he said.

More than two dozen suburban communities joined with Dallas, Fort Worth and Arlington in the unsuccessful effort to pass the 2009 measure, called the Texas Local Option Transportation Act. The larger municipalities also hired one of Austin's premier lobbying firms, HillCo Partners, to help push the bill.

"We didn't stop after the last session," Jordan said.

Planners are still working out details but hope to have a draft within 30 to 60 days. North Texas leaders will also hold discussions with their counterparts in San Antonio, Houston, Austin, Lubbock, Corpus Christi, El Paso and smaller urban areas to form a statewide coalition, Jordan said.

Metroplex leaders, he said, still have the same priorities as in 2009: finding money for up to 250 miles of commuter rail and expansion of the now overburdened road and highway network.

"The unparalleled quality of life that we've built is severely threatened by our congested highways and roadways," Moncrief told the lawmakers, saying that "many if not most" of North Texas residents are "fed up" with being stuck in traffic.

"They deserve answers," he said. "Not next month. Not next year. Now."

The daylong hearing by the House Transportation Committee and the Senate Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security was called to explore funding options to help the state avert a looming transportation crisis.

Some lawmakers are touting an increase in the gasoline tax, which hasn't been changed since 1991.

Deirdre Delisi, chairwoman of the Texas Transportation Commission, declined to take a position on the proposal but said the state needs financial stability to address "serious transportation challenges" over the next two decades.

The state will run out of money for new transportation projects by 2012. A panel of Texas business and civic leaders appointed by the commission says the state needs to invest at least \$315 billion through 2030 to maintain roadways, combat urban traffic congestion, and increase mobility and safety.

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