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## Committee OKs bill allowing urban Texas counties to seek 10-cent gas tax

BY DAVE MONTGOMERY

[dmontgomery@star-telegram.com](mailto:dmontgomery@star-telegram.com)

AUSTIN -- Legislation approved by the House Transportation Committee today would allow the state's urban counties to ask voters to approve a 10-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax to finance local transportation projects.

The bill, originating from legislation designed specially for North Texas, became statewide in scope after being reworked by Transportation Committee Chairman Joe Pickett, D-El Paso. The 6-1 vote sends the measure toward an uncertain outcome on the House floor in the closing three weeks of the legislative session.

"This is something I can take back to my county and ask them to support," Pickett told Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, who remains the House sponsor of the revised legislation. "I appreciate your working with me to help make this a statewide local option (bill)."

Pickett stripped five other funding options from the original bill – primarily fees on such things as auto registrations and drivers licenses - and came up with a single funding source: the local gasoline tax. Counties in a metropolitan planning region - there are 25 in Texas - could hold elections to decide whether to impose the local gasoline tax. The bill specifically prohibits using the revenue for toll projects.

Truitt, in outlining the legislation before the committee, said the bill provides "a statewide umbrella that would fit over the entire state as needed."

The bill is significantly different than the one that North Texas leaders unveiled at a press conference in February to finance road improvements and more than 250 miles of regional commuter rail. The bill was subsequently expanded to include several other areas of the state and encountered a chorus of opposition against the proposed funding options.

Truitt said local leaders in North Texas remain supportive. Though it has morphed from its original form, the legislation would still enable the region to fund needed projects to combat worsening traffic congestion, she said.

The bill now goes to the House Calendars Committee, which decides what bills go to the House floor. "If we get it to the floor, which we're planning to do, we'll see what happens there," Truitt said. "It's just too soon to predict the final outcome."

Bill Miller, an Austin lobbyist whose company has been retained by North Texas officials to help pass the bill, said Pickett's involvement was crucial in giving the bill momentum in the House. "The bill would not have come out of committee and have a future without the support of Chairman Pickett," said Miller, co-founder of HillCo Partners.

In a related move on Monday, the committee voted 7-0 to approve a proposed constitutional amendment designed to optimize transportation revenue from Texas' statewide gasoline tax.

The measure would allow the statewide tax- which hasn't been increased since 1991 -- to rise or fall with producer prices. Increases would be capped at 3 cents-per-gallon each biennium under the proposal. The proposed amendment would also ban "diversions" of gasoline tax revenue for purposes other than transportation.

*DAVE MONTGOMERY, 512-476-4294*