

House panel advances transit funding bill as conservative opposition decries it

By DAVE MONTGOMERY

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AUSTIN — Officials in North Texas began working the phones Tuesday to help push a committee-passed transportation funding bill through the House of Representatives as conservative groups sought to derail it.

The bill, approved by the House Transportation Committee on Tuesday, would allow the state's urban counties to ask voters to approve a 10-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax to finance local transportation projects.

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

While the bill differs significantly from the original, Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley and Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief welcomed the committee action and said they will work to win the bill's passage in the House. A 10-cent gasoline tax would generate an estimated \$611 million a year in the nine-county North Texas metropolitan planning region, according to the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

. is continuing . "We are pleased to see that a product of this magnitude . its momentum," Moncrief said while acknowledging that the measure would face further revisions on the House floor and in a House-Senate conference committee.

Pickett stripped five other funding options from the original bill — primarily fees on such things as auto registrations and drivers licenses — leaving a local gasoline tax as the lone funding source. Counties in a metropolitan planning organization — Texas has 25 — could hold elections to decide whether to impose a gasoline tax.

Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, the House sponsor, said the bill provides "a statewide umbrella that would fit over the entire state as needed."

In a related move Monday, the committee voted 7-0 to approve a proposed constitutional amendment that would allow the statewide gasoline tax — which hasn't been increased since 1991 — to rise with producer prices. Increases would be capped at 3 cents per gallon for each two-year period under the proposal.

The proposed amendment would also mandate that gasoline tax revenue be spent on transportation.

A coalition of conservative research organizations and taxpayer watchdog groups issued a joint news release saying that many Texans could be paying as much as 45 cents a gallon in combined state and local gasoline taxes within 10 years. The current state tax is 20 cents per gallon.

"Many citizens in the regions affected by this legislation will be blindsided by the skyrocketing gas taxes they could pay as a result of these bills," said Cathie Adams, president of Texas Eagle Forum. Other groups opposing the bill included the Texas Public Policy Foundation, Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, Americans for Prosperity and the Free Market Foundation.

North Texas leaders unveiled the original bill at a press conference in February as a top legislative priority 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.

The bill now goes to the House Calendars Committee, which decides which bills go to the House floor.

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