




North Texas transit funding plan derailed

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AUSTIN — A \$9.6 billion plan to construct 251 miles of regional commuter rail in North Texas was thrown into disarray Saturday with the collapse of legislation aimed at providing local funding for transportation projects.

"It's a bad day for the region," said Burleson Mayor Ken Shetter, chairman of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition. "Our ability to build a regionwide system does not exist."

The Senate-passed initiative, which would have allowed countywide elections to raise money for road and rail projects, was stripped out of legislation restructuring the Texas Department of Transportation, thus killing it.

Legislative negotiators who crafted the final version of the bill also eliminated a House-passed ban on red-light cameras.

Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, and Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, co-sponsors of the local-option provision, conceded that it was dead. North Texas officials had made the issue their top legislative priority, investing nearly a quarter-million dollars in a lobbying effort to pass the measure.

The local-option provision was the most contentious element during three days of deliberations by a joint conference committee to reconcile differences in the House and Senate versions of the bill. But the 10 conferees voted to drop the provision from their final report, released Saturday afternoon, despite fierce appeals from Carona, Truitt and others.

The House and Senate are expected to vote on the bill today, one day before the end of the 2009 Legislature. Carona, chairman of the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee, threatened earlier to kill the bill if it didn't have a local-option provision, but he displayed a less combative tone after the report was released.

"It's dead this session," Carona said. "But we'll be back next session stronger and more determined than ever."

The local-option initiative would have given county commissioners three funding options to put on a countywide ballot: a gasoline tax, a driver's license fee and a mobility improvement fee accompanying auto registration renewal.

"Senator Carona and I fought the good fight," Truitt said. "It will be back because the problem remains and will grow more serious between now and the next legislative session."

'Not the time to raise taxes'

Opponents of the measure, however, welcomed the developments. "I'm relieved," said Tarrant County Republican Chairwoman Stephanie Klick. "This is not the time to raise taxes."

More than 200 North Texas officials, representing city councils, businesses and chambers of commerce, rallied on the steps of the state Capitol on Friday in an effort to salvage the bill. They also fanned out to lobby lawmakers.

Three of the Senate's conferees signed the report, with Carona and Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, refusing to concur. All five House conferees signed it.

Rep. Gary Elkins, R-Houston, sponsor of the red-light-camera ban that was part of the House bill, said conferees used the ban as a bargaining chip. At one point, he said, negotiators considered a swap in which Senate conferees would accept the red-light ban in exchange for House acceptance of local option. But the offer ultimately evaporated.

The defeat of the local-option initiative ended a yearslong effort by North Texas leaders to finance long-term transportation needs in the nation's fourth-most-populous region. A similar effort ended in defeat in the 2007 Legislature.

What's next?

Without the funding mechanism, a huge question mark now hangs over the region's ambitious blueprint for improving its road system and moving forward on the regional rail network, Tarrant County officials acknowledged Saturday.

"It means all of that goes away," said Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, a former Fort Worth City Council member who led the Regional Transportation Council. "It means we can't fund those things."

Supporters of the initiative pressed the idea of local funding because of a critical shortfall of funding at the state level. Davis said state transportation officials warn that there will be no state money available for advancing new projects by 2012.

"There are no other options on the table for us," Davis said. "There's no statewide money. We've now shut down the ability to raise money regionally."

Shetter said local officials will "go back to the drawing board" to search for other ways to finance the projects. He also suggested a political response targeted at legislative opponents of the local-option plan. "I think we have to try to replace some of those people who are the obstacles," he said.

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