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D-FW needs 10-cent gas tax increase for transit projects, official says

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It would take a 10-cents-a-gallon gas tax increase across greater Dallas-Fort Worth to raise \$370 million a year for a 200-mile commuter rail system and improvements to area highways, an official said.

The potential nine-county gas tax increase was discussed Wednesday at the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, whose members are watching intently as state lawmakers negotiate a local-option-funding measure in the final weeks of the 2009 legislative session. The measure, if approved, would allow voters in metropolitan counties to consider tax and fee increases to pay for better mobility.

The latest proposal calls for an unspecified gas tax increase in Tarrant, Collin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Johnson, Kaufman, Parker and Rockwall counties.

Supporters say the amount would fall short of the estimated \$457 million a year needed to build the entire road and rail system but would still be workable.

"It doesn't quite get us there, but it gets us going in the right direction," said Dan Kessler, assistant transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Voters could be sold on a gas tax increase if they understood that the funds would stay in the area that generated them, unlike state and federal gas taxes, Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley said.

Lawmakers have refused to specify what amount of increase they might allow to go before voters. In the past, lawmakers have talked about an increase of as little as 2 cents a gallon, which would pay for relatively little work.

Another option would be not to raise the gas tax immediately but to index it so that it rises gradually with the cost of living, providing a long-term source of revenue.

Texas motorists pay a 20-cents-a-gallon statewide tax, which hasn't increased since 1991, and an 18.4-cents-a-gallon federal tax, which hasn't increased since 1993.

The original local-option plan, as created by area leaders, was to go to legislators — and then voters — with up to six funding options, including gas taxes, driver's license fees and vehicle registration fees. But this week, Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, began working on a compromise that would allow only a higher local gas tax.

Pickett is chairman of the House Transportation Committee. A vote on the issue could come next week.

A gas tax increase would generate the most revenue of all the options, Whitley said.

Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief told members of the regional transportation coalition that now is the time to pressure business leaders to call their state representatives and urge approval of the bill — and to make sure opponents don't sway supporters.

"This is the time to act," said Moncrief, a former state legislator. "If we don't act now, we give them an excuse to kill this bill."

Tarrant County leaders have talked mostly about spending their portion of the money on commuter rail lines. But on Wednesday, Whitley said a better strategy may be to spend some of it on road projects such as expanding Interstate 35W north of Fort Worth and working on U.S. 287 and Texas 360 in the Arlington/Mansfield corridor.

Such a move could make the higher gas tax more palatable for voters, Whitley said.

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