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Bill would end red-light cameras in Texas

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AUSTIN – Red light traffic cameras would be phased out under a provision included in legislation to toughen state oversight of Texas' massive transportation bureaucracy.

House members gave the bill preliminary approval Friday after including amendments by Rep. Gary Elkins, R-Houston, to give the Texas Department of Transportation authority over red light cameras in the state.

Current contracts for red light cameras in Texas cities would continue, but they could not be renewed and no new contracts could be negotiated.

"As soon as these contracts are up, (cameras) would have to come down," Elkins told the *Star-Telegram*. "We're just saying as a matter of public policy going forward, this state doesn't want them."

House members took steps late Thursday to make TxDot more accountable to the public, calling for an elected statewide commissioner and 14 elected representatives.

House members rejected a proposal that would have required the Texas Department of Transportation to buy environmentally friendly "green cement" in what lawmakers said was a slap at Midlothian cement plants blamed for much of the pollution in North Texas.

The legislation under consideration by the House would continue the department for another four years while strengthening state oversight in hopes of averting problems.

The bill is designed to curb some of the powers the department amassed earlier in the decade and dissolve what Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving, described as a "backdrop of distrust and frustration."

The amendment requiring green-cement purchases, defeated by a vote of 97-30, touched off a contentious debate between Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, whose district includes the Midlothian plants, and North Texas lawmakers insisting on tougher controls over the kilns.

"Mr. Pitts, you know I love you, but I have to stand up for the people in my district and the children in my district," Rep. Paula Pierson, D-Arlington, said as she debated Pitts from the microphone at the rear of the chamber.

Though Midlothian was never mentioned, the intent of the amendment by Rep. Roberto Alonzo, D-Dallas, was clear. It would have required the use of so-called dry technology that produces fewer pollutants, instead of the older "wet" technology used in Midlothian.

More than a half-dozen local governments, including Tarrant County, Fort Worth, Dallas, Arlington and Plano, have adopted "green cement" purchasing preferences.

"How dare you come into my district and try to close a plant" that has been an economic boost to the area, Pitts told Alonzo, saying that emissions in the area have been reduced by 64 percent over the past decade.

Pitts said automobile emissions produce "more pollution than this plant."

"Our biggest problem [in North Texas] is not this plant — it's highway traffic," Pitts said.

Rep. Lon Burnam, D-Fort Worth, told Pitts that "it's pretty outrageous for you" to suggest that North Texas residents should not be concerned about pollution from the cement kilns, adding that "children in my district are breathing bad air" because of the emissions.

The bill stems from the sunset review process that requires lawmakers to examine the performance of selected state agencies during each legislative session.

The Transportation Department sunset bill is considered one of lawmakers' top priorities this session, reflecting the scope of the bureaucracy, the importance of transportation projects and legislators' desire to put the department under greater scrutiny.

Lawmakers faced 162 amendments as they began debate on the bill.

"The public felt like they were not involved in the process at all, and all the members of the House felt the same way," Harper-Brown said.

North Texas leaders consider transportation their top issue as they develop regional strategies to deal with congestion and pollution that threatens to hamstring economic growth. The need for additional roadways across the state has increased with the population, leaving Texas with an estimated \$300 billion shortfall in transportation needs.

The Transportation Department had a budget of \$17.5 billion for the 2008-09 fiscal biennium, much of which was devoted to planning, building and maintaining roads and bridges, according to the House Research Organization. The department has a staff of 14,500 in its Austin headquarters and 25 district offices.

House members rejected efforts to strip one of the bill's cornerstones, a legislative oversight committee designed to make recommendations for state transportation needs.

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