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King: Local option transportation bill not the right answer for Texas

Weatherford rep says local-option bill lacked spending safeguards

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No state representative worked harder this legislative session to solve North Texas' traffic congestion than my good friend Vicki Truitt. I share Truitt's concerns and sense of urgency on this issue; however, we disagree on the funding solution that she and others proposed to the Legislature and on the practicality of commuter rail service.

The new transportation taxes proposed this session failed to acknowledge current economic times, the recession, growing unemployment and the credit crisis. Texas families already pay an average 32.7 percent of their limited income to the government in local, state and federal taxes.

Texas families and businesses simply have no more money to give to government, and particularly not now. Senate Bill 855 and House Bill 9 sought to authorize new tax options that included additional fees for car registration and vehicle emissions. The final version called for local elections to impose a motor fuel tax up to 10 cents per gallon, up to a doubling of the driver license fee from \$24 to \$48, and up to a \$60 vehicle registration fee.

These new taxes and fees would raise billions, but they would hit low-income families and small businesses the hardest. There are other less regressive options that make better economic sense.

To start, there is the diversion of funds from transportation in our state budget, a practice that has been occurring for years. More than \$1.6 billion in transportation tax funds were redirected from the Texas Transportation Department to other purposes by state budget writers in 2008-09 alone. These are tax dollars already collected specifically for transportation. Why have we not legislatively ended these diversions, which have gone on for many years?

Next, it's important to remember that in 2007 voters statewide approved \$5 billion in new transportation bonds, yet not one dollar has been issued. A Transportation Department appropriations bill (which died on

the Texas House calendar last week without even a vote) would have funded \$2 billion of the \$5 billion. These are transportation funds already approved by Texas voters.

Finally, I remain unconvinced that rail is the best solution for North Texas commuters, especially when there are insufficient accountability protections. The final version of the local-option tax plan called for "an emphasis on road and rail" but lacked any criteria that would require county officials to select projects based upon their ability to reduce congestion.

Studies show that, on average, rail transit systems cost \$4,000 annually per new commuter, and these studies did not consider urban areas as expansive as the Metroplex covering 9,286 square miles and 12 counties. If the state or local governments are going to ask taxpayers for more money, safeguards need to be in place to ensure money is not wasted on projects that may appear attractive, but actually do very little to reduce congestion.

Lest we forget, transportation projects are not at a standstill and the Legislature will fix the Transportation Department sunset issue without any interruptions. Many major projects are planned in the North Texas region in the coming years, which include:

DFW Connector (completion in 2014) — reconstruction and expansion of Texas 114 and Texas 121.

North Tarrant Express (several phases complete in 2010 and 2015) — 36-mile corridor to expand Interstate 35W, Interstate 820 and Texas 121/183.

I-30 Mobility Improvement Project (scheduled completion in fall 2010) — expansion of the Interstate 30 corridor in the Arlington area.

Available options must be employed and new solutions sought for the transportation crisis we face in North Texas, but a cadre of new local taxes, including a 10-cent gas tax, with little transparency and unclear standards for reducing congestion is not the answer.

District 61 state Rep. Phil King, R-Weatherford, represents Parker and Wise counties.