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Vicki Truitt: Texans needed the option to fix regional transportation problems

Texans needed the option to fix regional transportation problems

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Truitt

The Metroplex is home to more than 6.1 million people. In a brief 20 years, we anticipate 9 million people, 5 million of whom will need to get to and from work. The Texas Department of Transportation reports that by the first quarter of 2012, without additional funding, there will be no money for new construction. Considering existing gridlock in some areas, our traffic congestion must be alleviated.

During the 81st Legislature's regular session, Sen. John Carona and I carried legislation that would have given Metroplex residents the right to vote on whether to fund transportation infrastructure projects with defined fees and/or a 5- or 10-cent increase in our local gas tax, or not fund these projects and continue to experience the ever-increasing, stifling traffic.

The Texas Local Option Transportation Act would have allowed each county to spend the revenue on projects within that county. TLOTA passed in the Senate but in the House fell victim to parliamentary delays orchestrated by Democrats to defeat the voter ID bill, to delays in the House Transportation Committee and to misrepresentation by certain conservative groups.

Anti-tax groups opposed TLOTA, saying we should stop "diversions" (state fuel tax money being spent on items other than roads). I'm all for that, but stopping all diversions would address only about half our road funding shortfall.

"Make cities commit their local sales tax to pay for transportation," some say, and I agree. Cities need to have skin in the game, but for most cities in traffic-laden areas, sales tax is committed for years into the future to pay for bonding obligations. Until that money is freed up, is it wise to wait up to 20 years before doing anything about our traffic? It takes up to 10 years to build a major road.

Some allege that TLOTA would harm low-income families. Calculations show that this method of finance is less regressive and less burdensome on low-income families than sales tax.

Although they carry a true and transparent "user" fee, many don't like toll roads. There is no such thing as a "free" road. Building transportation infrastructure requires funding.

Some say this is not the time to ask the voters to make such a decision. Is there ever a "good" time to pay even for a necessity? The earliest a voter-approved fee could have been collected was 2012.

Some allege that TLOTA did not offer protections for voters. Ballot language would be far more specific than that offered on a school bond election. What is more transparent and accountable than an elected body of county commissioners calling an election to give the voters the opportunity to vote yes or no on a ballot that specifically describes a project, showing a finite cost for capital outlay, what it would cost for ongoing maintenance and how long it would take to pay for it?

I don't like taxes, fees or tolls, but pretending we don't have a transportation infrastructure problem in urban areas is irresponsible, and the people of Texas expect the Legislature to address such problems.

North Texas and other traffic-choked areas of the state are desperate for relief. Neither the state nor federal government has a remedy for our traffic congestion. We need the right of self-determination. We need the right to pick our poison, stifling traffic or giving a few more bucks a year out of our pocket to move people and goods, clear our air of pollution from stalled traffic and improve our quality of life.

Anti-everything group rhetoric does not solve problems.

Texas must tackle this real problem in a realistic way before our traffic problems kill our economy and jobs. Short of a special session with TLOTA on the governor's agenda, we can look forward to at least two more years of increasing traffic and no solution in sight.

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