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Editorials  

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Editorial: Complaints about transportation bill don't hold water

To believe the vocal critics of the local-option transportation funding bill, which is slowly making its way to the floor of the Texas House, you'd have to think that the measure will kill the state economy, drive residents to bankruptcy and bypass ways to use existing revenue for crucial rail and road projects.

A careful look at SB 855 finds that none of these alarmist concerns holds water, and some are deliberate distortions.

House members should evaluate this bill with clear eyes. They were sent to Austin to help solve the state's problems, including the lack of money to fight traffic congestion and dirty air in major metropolitan areas like Dallas-Fort Worth.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, president of Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, has a two-part answer for almost every ill that afflicts Texas: no new taxes, and cut the ones that we have.

If the Legislature approves this bill and its plan to let metro-area residents decide whether to build and pay for new rail and road projects, Sullivan said in a news release last week, "Texas will no longer be able to hold itself out as a beacon of economic sanity."

And just how sane is it to sit in traffic gridlock? To breathe foul air every summer? Maybe rural Texans don't have these problems, but neither does this bill require them to pay for all of the solutions.

With its low taxes and good labor markets, Texas is a shining star of relative economic stability in these dark days of worldwide recession. But bad air and traffic will be serious economic deterrents for the state's big cities when the recession ends.

Tina Benkiser, chairman of the Republican Party of Texas, said in a news release that moving this bill during a recession is "bad fiscal policy, bad timing and, in Texas, bad politics."

Granted, it takes guts to do this, but the Texas Legislature is no place for sissies.

By 2012, no money will be left in the state highway fund to pay for new transportation projects or to properly maintain existing ones. SB 855 simply calls on lawmakers to allow the state's largest cities, at the proper time, to ask their own voters what they want to do.

Under the bill, county commissioners in metropolitan areas would decide whether and when to call an election on local transportation projects and ways to pay for them. These commissioners have political futures at stake. It's fanciful (or a scare tactic) to say they would call an election before the economy improves.

Justin Keener, vice president for policy and communications for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, points to the Legislature's continuing misuse of highway fund revenue. Even the budget being drafted for the 2010-11 biennium "will continue to divert billions of dollars in transportation taxes to nontransportation purposes."

True. More than \$1 billion in highway fund revenue supports the Department of Public Safety. Other money goes to the Texas Education Agency, the attorney general's office and even the Travis County district attorney's office, among other places.

Here's the rub: The North Central Texas Council of Governments estimates that if all those diversions ended today, only about \$159 million a year in additional transportation funding would come to Dallas-Fort Worth. Compare that to the \$170 million it would take to pay for just one unfunded project, fixing the snarled mess that is Interstate 35W at its intersection with Texas 183/Airport Freeway east of downtown Fort Worth. The backlog of unfunded road, rail and maintenance projects in the region totals more than \$100 billion.

The House must pass SB 855 and give the region the opportunity to help fix its own transportation problems.