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Editorial: House committee chairman takes control of transit bill

State Rep. Joe Pickett, the House Transportation Committee chairman, has been a busy man. Besides shepherding a review and remake of the Texas Department of Transportation through the House, the El Paso Democrat has decided to rewrite in just a few days a regional rail and roads bill that Dallas-Fort Worth leaders spent six years crafting.

If he can come up with a better bill, good for him. But until we see it, we're skeptical. And we don't like it that local legislators have been edged out.

The *Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News* editorial boards intensified North Texas transportation efforts in 2003 by bringing elected officials and others together and calling for a unified regional rail transit system. The North Texas population of more than 6.5 million, projected to top 9 million by 2030, makes such a system essential to relieve traffic congestion and air pollution.

This legislative session ends in just 22 days, and deadlines for certain actions on bills start kicking in Monday. We're nervous, so we want to help Pickett by telling him some elements that we consider crucial to the bill.

Accountability

The idea all along has been to let voters decide what transportation projects are necessary and how to pay for them. State Rep. Vicki Truitt's bill calls for county-by-county elections on the issue. Pickett in the past has said that a regionwide vote might be better. It would not.

Having county commissioners call project-specific and revenue-specific elections gives them some level of political responsibility. Under a regional election, local voters could hold no one accountable for timely and fiscally responsible implementation of projects.

We also know that the list of options for financing those projects has been narrowed to one: an additional motor fuels tax of no more than 10 cents per gallon. We'd rather have more options, but we can live with a fuel tax if the tax level is flexible.

Truitt's bill called for a project selection committee that would hold no fewer than five public meetings to gather local opinions on what projects should be included. Small and mid-size cities were guaranteed representation on the committee. Pickett must not leave out those provisions.

Proportionality

Truitt's bill says efforts should be made to ensure that each city will benefit from the selected projects in rough proportion to the amount of money collected within its boundaries. How could voters be persuaded to approve paying additional taxes from which they get no benefit?

Flexibility

This element is absolutely essential for the Dallas-Fort Worth region. In order to achieve those roughly proportional benefits, Truitt would allow the new tax revenue to be spent on rail, roads, sidewalks and other transportation improvements as decided in the countywide selection process. On the eastern side of the region, many cities have been paying taxes for years to support Dallas Area Rapid Transit rail service and would not receive any new rail service under current projections. They don't want to be double-taxed, so they must be given additional spending options.

Transparency

Truitt's bill says that all money raised in a county must be kept in a separate fund that remains in that county under the control of county commissioners. These accounts must be audited and transactions publicly reported annually. Pickett should consider improving this provision by requiring that receipts and expenditures from the new tax be posted online monthly so that voters can track them.

Regardless of what Pickett does, he must do it quickly and get it out of his committee. We don't want this to die for lack of time and have to do it all over again next session.