

COMMENTARY

Transportation crisis not on front burner

By PEGGY FIKAC
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AUSTIN — If a state agency affecting just about everyone told lawmakers cash problems would soon start putting the brakes on its work, you might think lawmakers would rush to address the problem.

Not if that agency is the hot-button Texas Department of Transportation — at least, not yet.

But with just weeks to go in the legislative session, state leaders have met on the issue, and Texas House Transportation Committee Chairman Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, is hoping to jump-start a proposal to allow local communities to raise money to fund local transportation projects.

Pickett's proposal likely would give all communities the option of deciding whether to increase local gasoline taxes.

The idea is a broader version of legislation that earlier passed the Senate to allow voters in certain areas to raise taxes or fees for local projects. Harris County wasn't included in the earlier measure. Both proposals are tied to a proposed constitutional amendment to end diversions from the gasoline-tax-fueled state highway fund. Pickett's idea also would amend the constitution to allow the local-option taxes. Amending the constitution requires a two-thirds vote of lawmakers and statewide voter approval.

The legislative margin required for an amendment, given anti-tax sentiment, gives Pickett's broader idea a big hill to climb. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, said flatly when asked why an earlier push to directly raise the gasoline tax statewide hasn't gained momentum: "Raising taxes in the near future is out of the question, not because the money's not needed but because the economy can't take it." Lingering distrust of TxDOT in some quarters due to past disputes with lawmakers also has affected the sentiment for agency funding increases.

As it stands, absent a fresh infusion of cash, TxDOT expects to be out of money to start new road projects by 2012 unless it makes big cuts in road maintenance. It also may have to delay some bond projects in the pipeline unless more money is allocated for interest payments.

Texas Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Chairman John Carona, R-Dallas, has been sounding the alarm about transportation funding and pushed the earlier local-option measure. He and Pickett also want to establish a new revolving fund, paid for by money including bond proceeds, to finance road projects.

"There's no question this is a transportation crisis," Carona said late last week. "The Legislature continues to not focus on it."

Maybe the focus will come soon. "We can't leave the session without starting something different," Pickett said. "We can't."

Pickett a car buff

It might seem fitting that the House Transportation Committee chairman would be a car buff. But “the Jay Leno of El Paso?” Rep. Joe Pickett, who said that nickname drew the attention of the comedian and car fancier, last week had a framed Leno photo on his House desk inscribed, “Yo Joe. Let’s race on the track.”

Schiefer makes reunion

Former state lawmaker, former ambassador and former Texas Rangers baseball club president Tom Schieffer, who’s eyeing a Democratic run for governor, said as he returned to the House for former members’ reunion: “I’ve done a lot of things in my life, but I can tell you that I’ve never enjoyed anything more than being right here on the floor of this House.”

Today is Day 112 of the 140-day regular session.

[*pfikac@express-news.net*](mailto:pfikac@express-news.net)