

Waco Tribune

EDITORIAL: Texas Transportation Commission should OK staff plan for I-35 improvements

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When members of the beleaguered Texas Transportation Commission meet today, we hope they'll remember that improving and widening increasingly treacherous Interstate 35 isn't just an option but a virtual contract between responsible state leaders and the constituents who live along this busy patch of highway.

Not to mention anybody else who dares to motor through our part of Texas.

State obligations to we motorists and residents are always a component when deciding highway projects. But it should be especially so when the decision involves I-35, one of the most heavily traveled stretches of road in our state. It's symbolic of a pact of sorts when Republicans and Democrats alike hailed the North American Free Trade Agreement, which only put more stress on it.

That's why we wholeheartedly support a plan by Texas Department of Transportation officials to plow more than \$1 billion from voter-approved highway funds into critical widening projects along the interstate in our area. Among other things, it will relieve traffic bottlenecks in Hill County that have on occasion proved deadly.

That said, we understand the pressure that our highway commissioners must feel today. *Trib* staff writer Michael Shapiro's use of the Public Information Act to uncover correspondence between regional leaders, lawmakers and highway officials highlights one sure thing: the dwindling funds available for a growing list of crucial highway work.

Some correspondence shows politicians seeking to alter transportation officials' recommendations for I-35, such as state Rep. Jim Keffer's efforts in favor of projects in Hood County, part of his district. They include improving a railroad crossing in Cresson.

Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief acknowledges the needs of increasingly constricted areas of I-35 between the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex and Austin, even as he makes a case for an interchange in his own city.

All of these pleas are no doubt sincere. But will our leaders consequently bite the bullet and face funding realities about maintaining our state's roads? Or will they preside quietly as we watch the pride of Texas crumble?

This week, Gov. Rick Perry acknowledged that state officials will have to "expand our ability to raise some dollars" for state road and highway infrastructure — only to be promptly tarred by political rivals who themselves offer nothing in the way of ideas and solutions.

For now, the need for attention along I-35 through Central Texas is dire. The time is right, with funds already available and waiting through Proposition 12 money approved by the voters back in 2007. To ignore this work any longer would be irresponsible.