



End diversions to fix highway fund

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The Texas Department of Transportation is willing to consider all options to raise revenue and reverse a funding shortage for road construction and maintenance. That was the message Amadeo Saenz Jr., TxDOT's executive director, delivered to the San Antonio Mobility Coalition recently, Express-News staff writer Jeorge Zarazua reported.

That shortfall is huge and growing. Due to the weak economy and increases in automobile fuel efficiency, revenues from the gas tax — the largest funding source for the highway fund — fell for the first time in fiscal year 2008. Last year, they fell again for a second year.

Increasing the motor fuels sales tax and motor vehicle registration fees are among the possible alternatives TxDOT is considering. So is a controversial measure that would assess fees on motorists based on the number of miles they drive. Nothing can be done without action by the Legislature.

What Saenz didn't talk about, however, was the need to end the legislative diversions from the highway fund. For the current biennium, Hearst Austin Bureau chief Peggy Fikac notes, those diversions total \$1.15 billion. That's only a fraction of TxDOT's entire budget of nearly \$17 billion for the period.

Ending the diversions won't come close to solving the highway funding problem. An independent commission of civic and business leaders concluded last year that Texas needs to spend \$14 billion annually — almost twice what it is spending today — to maintain its transportation infrastructure and build the new roads a growing state needs.

But ending these diversions is the essential prerequisite to build a consensus for more highway funding, whether it comes from tolls — as Gov. Rick Perry favors — or from increasing the gas tax, something that hasn't been done since 1991. Taxpayers will not support increases in taxes or fees that are supposedly dedicated to road construction but in reality are pilfered to patch the state's general fund. Nor should they.

The diversions from the highway fund aren't the only examples of deceitful tax accounting in Austin. They do, however, represent the biggest one.

If Saenz, Perry and legislative leaders hope to deal with the transportation shortfall during the upcoming session, they'll end these diversions before trying to push any of the alternatives for new revenue.

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