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## Candor needed on TxDOT funds

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Texas is far behind the curve when it comes to funding transportation infrastructure. In 1997, the Texas Department of Transportation estimated the state needed to spend \$11 billion annually over the following decade to maintain existing infrastructure and meet the needs of a growing state. Ten years later, a study by Texas Comptroller Susan Combs found the state was actually spending about \$3.1 billion annually.

In 2008, a blue-ribbon panel of civic and business leaders conducted a new assessment of Texas' transportation infrastructure needs over the next two decades. The 2030 Committee concluded Texas will need to spend \$313 billion, or more than \$15 billion annually over the next 20 years to keep the state moving. TxDOT's budget for the current biennium is about \$8.5 billion annually.

Yes, the Legislature needs to end the diversions of highway-fund money to purposes other than roads. But when those diversions total only \$1.15 billion, that doesn't come close to filling the gap for road maintenance and construction.

What's worse, Texas has essentially kicked the infrastructure can down the road by paying for construction with borrowed money. As Hearst Austin Bureau chief Peggy Fikac reported, TxDOT says the state — meaning taxpayers — will pay \$272.5 million next year for debt service on \$6.45 billion in transportation bonds. Between 2013 and 2032, debt service for those bonds will cost \$400 million annually.

You can lay a lot of asphalt for \$400 million. That's the penalty Texans will pay for not actually budgeting for the roads the state needs.

Some leaders in Austin are starting to come around to this realization. Senate Finance Chairman Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, is discussing the possibility of a constitutional amendment requiring voter approval that would raise the state's 20-cent-per-gallon motor fuels tax enough to pay off the debt service on the road bonds. The motor fuels tax hasn't been raised since 1990.

That, along with ending the highway fund diversions, would be a good start. But it's still not enough to meet the state's transportation needs. Instead of half-measures, Texans deserve some straight talk from Austin about what it will take to meet those needs.

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