



[Austin's aversion to tax hikes makes toll roads inevitable](#)

Bruce Davidson - Express-News
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Don't blame the Alamo Regional Mobility Authority when U.S. 281 from north of Loop 1604 becomes a toll road.

RMA officials are in the midst of the lengthy Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. They are studying three possible approaches to dealing with the nightmarish traffic on U.S. 281.

One scenario involves overpasses at the key intersections and non-continuous frontage, as RMA spokesman Leroy Alloway described it. Another would have expressway lanes and continuous frontage road from Loop 1604 to the Bexar County line. And a third option would have elevated U.S. 281 lanes, leaving most of the existing structure in place.

RMA Chairman Bill Thornton emphasizes that while the project is listed as a toll road in Metropolitan Planning Organization plan, that status is a placeholder.

Thornton and other RMA officials want to fix the traffic problem. They'll take the money to build the road wherever they can get it.

The RMA's outreach efforts are cooling the temperature of the debate somewhat for now.

And the EIS process will not address funding until the very end. The 2011 legislative session lies between now and the December 2011 deadline for picking a funding option that is required to win EIS approval from the Federal Highway Administration.

A number of options are possible — sort of. Lawmakers could increase the motor fuels tax, which has traditionally funded Texas highways.

That, of course, is a slim possibility. Gov. Rick Perry reminded voters earlier this year that he has signed a pledge to oppose all tax increases.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Bill White has talked about cutting the state budget and ending highway fund diversions.

The state faces a budget hole that could be as large as \$18 billion in the next biennium.

And earlier this week, the Express-News' Peggy Fikac reported that House Speaker Joe Straus said lawmakers must cover the state's anticipated shortfall without a tax increase.

Don't count on a statewide motor fuels tax increase.

Lawmakers could approve gambling measures that would bring in a few billion dollars, but San Antonio state Rep. Jose Menendez said it would take several years for the state to see much of the new revenue even if gambling measures pass in 2011.

And lawmakers could give counties the option of asking voters to approve local measures for generating transportation revenue, such as a countywide gas tax.

That proposal failed in 2009, but advocates will try again.

RMA officials will have a public hearing on the U.S. 281 EIS in June 2011 and must submit their work for federal approval in early 2012.

Clearly, the most likely funding alternative by the end of 2011 is making the project a toll road.

Those who find that prospect obnoxious should immediately begin pressuring their legislators to approve another viable source of funding. The RMA will not stand in the way. The entity exists only because the officials in Austin, mainly Perry's appointees, forced the move toward toll roads.

Many motorists who do the U.S. 281 crawl day after day are ready for a toll road. The relief would be immense during rush hour.

Something's got to give. Lawmakers can push tolls aside by providing some revenue or local options. That's a bad bet.

Expect toll roads to be a fact of life in Bexar County. If it bothers you, blame the state government leadership in Austin, not the RMA.

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