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Gridlock in roads policy

John Carona and Kirk Watson - Special to the Express-News

You know Texas traffic is bad. You've heard that it will soon get worse. But what about the state's efforts to get you out of traffic?

Transportation policy in Texas is moving as slowly as that 18-wheel truck sitting in front of you at rush hour. If there's a difference, though, it's the trucker is in less denial about the state's road situation than elected leaders are.

Right now, traffic — and the state's inability to deal with it — is merely maddening. But a decade from now, when tens of millions more people will be pouring onto little more than the current road network, it will become an economic disaster for individuals as well as business.

This week, the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee heard testimony from mayors, county judges, business leaders, transportation experts, finance experts, and the public. The message, overwhelmingly, was clear:

When it comes to transportation, Texas is broke. The state can't afford the infrastructure it needs to keep goods flowing and our economy thriving, let alone accommodate future generations. Stop doing nothing.

Today, the state's transportation revenue is almost equal to the maintenance costs for our current system. Texas can barely maintain the roads it has, let alone build new ones.

Yes, voters in 2007 approved \$5 billion in bonds — debt that will be repaid primarily through sales taxes. But that's a tiny fraction of the tens of billions of dollars required for essential projects that are well into the planning stages.

As grim as the funding situation is, however, it's not nearly as depressing as the failure of elected leaders in every branch of government to acknowledge the problem, let alone begin grappling with it.

More than a year ago, we co-authored an editorial outlining steps that need to be taken to build the roads, rail lines, and other projects that will move Texans through their communities and across the state. Those steps included ending transportation funding diversions, giving regions the ability to pay for their own transportation projects upon local voter approval, re-writing a nearly 20-year-old gas tax system, and reforming the Texas Department of Transportation through comprehensive audit and policy changes.

Since then, there's been a legislative session, a special session, and the better part of a political primary season. Yet there has been virtually no movement in any of these areas.

Instead, politicians of every stripe rely on simplistic solutions and expectations removed from reality.

Incorrectly, some assume that fixing the diversion problem alone will provide the necessary funds — which it will not. And, of course, anti-government demagogues, masquerading as conservatives, have embarked on frantic e-mail campaigns filled with misinformation and lacking any practical solutions.

Texas needs leaders who will honestly present the tough choices that Texans face. The Legislature should continue to look for departmental efficiencies while revisiting Texas' motor fuels tax — which hasn't been changed since 1991 and no longer keeps pace with the state's growing needs. This represents the most fiscally responsible approach.

In addition, the Legislature must follow through immediately on commitments to end funding diversions away from transportation infrastructure.

These steps would begin to provide desperately needed funds to help get Texas moving again, while restoring confidence in the Texas Department of Transportation.

But before those things can happen, leaders must stop pretending that there is a something-for-nothing solution to our traffic problems.

Sens. John Carona, R-Dallas, and Kirk Watson, D-Austin, serve as chair and vice-chair of the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee.