

# Without new funds or ideas, gridlock looms

By Bruce Davidson / Express-News Editorial Page Editor

Published: 11:39 p.m., Tuesday, December 14, 2010

Frustrated Texans who are disgusted with the growing mess surrounding the state's transportation infrastructure often call for ending the diversion of highway funds to unrelated programs.

The proposal makes sense, but those people who say ending motor fuels tax diversions is enough to solve the problem are either mistaken or intentionally misleading their audience.

In the current biennium, \$1.15 billion was diverted from the highway fund to other purposes. The [Texas Department of Transportation](#)'s two-year budget was about \$18 billion — including \$1.6 billion in federal stimulus funds, according an October story by [Peggy Fikac](#), [Hearst Austin Bureau](#) chief.

In testimony to a select [House committee](#) earlier this year, TxDOT's Chief Financial Officer [James Bass](#) said a special committee of business and civic leaders determined that “we need to invest \$315 billion in today's dollars between now and 2030 just to prevent worsening traffic and maintain existing assets.”

Bass added, “At least since 2002, the amount of state motor fuel tax revenue deposited to the [State Highway Fund](#) was less than what was spent to maintain the more than 190,000 lane-miles on the state highway system.”

In 2009, state motor fuel tax revenues declined 2.17 percent, Bass told lawmakers.

With population growth continuing at a rapid pace, Texas' transportation system is clearly in a state of crisis.

Yet when lawmakers convene in January, they are facing a budget shortfall estimated to be in the \$20 billion range.

Legislative leaders are on the record as opposing any tax hikes. And Bexar lawmakers have made it clear to local government officials that new transportation funding is a bad bet.

Realizing the difficulty of the situation, Mayor [Julián Castro](#) and County Judge [Nelson Wolff](#) orchestrated a series of meetings among the various components of San Antonio's transportation universe.

VIA Metropolitan Transit, the [Alamo Regional Mobility Authority](#), the [Metropolitan Planning Organization](#) and representatives of chambers of commerce were among those at the table.

On Thursday, City Council is scheduled to vote on the unified legislative agenda produced by the meetings.

“We felt like our chances would be better if we could speak with one voice and common priorities,” said [Carlos Contreras](#), San Antonio's director of intergovernmental relations.

Included in the list is ending diversions of motor fuels tax revenues.

New ideas such as transportation reinvestment zones and a constitutional amendment letting Texans decide whether to tax themselves for transportation are on the list along with many plans that lawmakers foolishly let slip through the cracks in better economic times, such as increasing and indexing the motor fuels tax.

The motor fuels tax has not been increased since it was set at 20 cents per gallon in 1991.

Lawmakers' repeated failure to make responsible transportation decisions have led to the problems that Texas has today.

Contreras described San Antonio's needs as "severe." Drive out to U.S. 281 and Loop 1604 during rush hour or even on Saturday afternoon if you don't believe it.

If lawmakers don't come up with funds at the state level, they should give communities the tools to fend for themselves.

But the sad truth is that rather than making responsible decisions and approving new sources of revenue, lawmakers are expected to choose draconian cuts over investing in the state's future.

[bdavidson@express-news.net](mailto:bdavidson@express-news.net)