

The public must demand better solutions to traffic

City, state can't afford the cost of doing nothing.

By Jim Reed and Vic Suhm / Special to the Express-News

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If the Texas transportation system were a medical patient, the diagnosis would be failing health on the verge of critical condition. Our urban and suburban roadways are like clogged arteries, many of our rural roads and bridges are like brittle bones, and our funding sources are like lungs with little oxygen. Without leadership, neglect of our transportation system will put our economy on life support.

Bundle.com recently ranked Dallas/Fort Worth the most costly commute in the nation, and Houston and Austin are in the top 10. Absent new money in a legislative session with a historic budget shortfall, the [Texas Department of Transportation](#) could run out of funds for new projects as early as next year. More money already is dedicated to paying off old highway bonds than building new roads. And soon bonded indebtedness and maintenance will leave no state money for new projects.

In San Antonio, this means improvements to key regional corridors such as U.S. 281, Loop 1604 and I-35 will not be made, or will require toll financing.

A temporary stopgap measure is emerging in the Senate that will give life to new roads for a couple more years. Senate leaders are talking about authorizing another \$3 billion in road bonds. The Transportation Advocates of Texas supports the proposal because any new money is beneficial to relieve gridlock and improve highway safety. But our organization's goal is to achieve a stable, sustainable revenue stream to fund transportation infrastructure. Borrowing provides short-term relief, but we need a long-term vision.

There are plenty of prescriptions for a better system. But is the political will present? We ask the public and the business community to demand something better.

Just as there is a cost to building modern infrastructure, there is a cost to doing nothing. Projects delayed will cost more due to inflation. Worsening gridlock means parents missing family meals or arriving late for their child's soccer games.

But we are not without solutions. The gas tax hasn't been increased in 20 years — and its buying power has significantly diminished due to inflation. Vehicle registration fees could be raised and dedicated to high-priority projects. Allowing local officials to access a portion of the gas tax or other sources of revenue would also provide relief. And we support ending the diversion of highway dollars to spending on other priorities.

The problem is an unwillingness to embrace one or multiple long-term solutions because of political calculations. So, here we are in 2011. The state not only has declined to enact new sources of long-term revenue, it has restricted the ability of locals to do that in lieu of state inaction. Borrowing generates limited revenue, and at great cost to future generations. Absent state and local tax revenues, communities choking on congestion have few options besides toll roads. And those are restricted by limits the Legislature placed on comprehensive development agreements.

Where does that leave us? Lost jobs by the thousands in a few years, traffic jams that may one day rival Los Angeles, crumbling rural roads that are the lifeblood of small-town businesses and no relief in sight.

The only way this will change is if the public speaks up about the high cost of doing nothing. Visit our website texastransportation.org. You can use our technology tools to communicate directly to your legislator. Unless private citizens and businesses act, traffic will get a lot worse before it gets better.

Jim Reed is chairman, and [Vic Suhm](#) vice-chairman, of the Transportation Advocates of Texas, an organization of elected officials, regional transportation leaders and business leaders.

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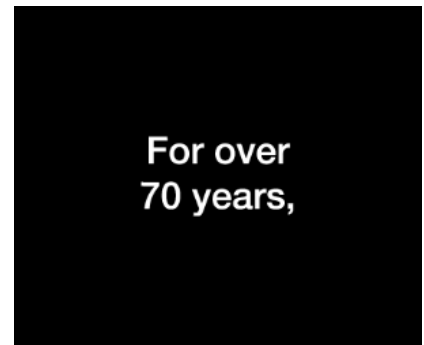
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