

Dallas Morning News

Poll: Texas voters favor cutting highway funds first

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AUSTIN – Highways would be bye-ways if voters were in charge of cutting the state budget.

With up to a \$16 billion budget shortfall facing the state next year, 41 percent of Texans said in a new poll they would make up some of the deficit by slicing highway spending.

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One in five would favor raising taxes or fees, while relatively few said they would cut education or health care for the poor, according to *The Dallas Morning News* poll.

The answer could be a minor setback to Gov. Rick [Perry](#), who has made transportation a high priority in his administration, and possibly a small boost to Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, who has made toll roads one of the biggest attacks in her campaign against him.

"It reinforces there are no easy choices," said Dale Craymer, president of the Texas Taxpayer and Research Association, a nonpartisan research group.

But in times of duress, projects that are concrete and steel, costly and take years to complete will be the first to go, he said.

"It's not so much an indicator that people are willing to tolerate the traffic as much as it is recognition about the cost of fixing it. You can throw billions at the problem and not make a dent," Craymer said.

Asked where to get money for roads, voters were even more ambivalent. Given five widely debated options, those polled ranked toll roads the highest but with only 21 percent.

"It tells me that 20 percent like toll roads, but 80 percent don't like them," Craymer said.

"But it's going to be some combination of all those items that will be considered" by the 2011 Legislature, he said.

Not far behind, 16 percent of Texans said they would support an increase in the state gas tax.

Lawmakers haven't raised the state gas tax since 1991, when they set it at 20 cents per gallon.

The other options: borrowing through state bonds, taking money from other programs or allowing "local option" gas taxes in metro areas.

Blum and Weprin Associates Inc. conducted the telephone poll of 1,508 registered voters Feb. 2 through Wednesday for *The News* and four other major Texas newspapers. The margin of error is 2.5 percentage points, meaning the findings could vary that much in either direction.

Immigration options

Texas voters also were also given options about dealing with illegal immigrants, and 38 percent polled said they should be deported.

A combined majority picked two other options that would give immigrants a chance to stay: 29 percent favored a path to citizenship and 23 percent said they should be given work visas.

"There is a plurality for deporting them, and the path to citizenship is not wildly popular in the state except among a few groups – minorities and the young," said the pollster, Mickey Blum.

Economy, jobs

The economy and jobs were a prevalent worry for many of those interviewed, especially coupled with the state deficit.

Most said they believed offering incentives for businesses to move to Texas was the best way to create jobs. Only 16 percent said the state should spend money on public projects as a way to put Texans back to work.

Craymer said that answer underscores the way Texans feel about highways, with people more concerned about immediate concerns than future needs.

The choice of cutting highways, while it is a \$17 billion budget item, is difficult because much of that comes from existing gas taxes, federal highway funds and vehicle operation fees. State revenues account for only \$310 million.

"You can't really save money in transportation and use it on something else," Craymer said. "But it's not surprising that would be the first item on the list to cut in times of budget duress."

THE CANDIDATES

Hank Gilbert, 50, is a cattle rancher from Whitehouse, south of Tyler. He lost to [Republican](#) incumbent [Todd Staples](#) in 2006, but picked up more votes than almost any other [Democrat](#) running for statewide office. He made a brief run for governor before switching races in December. A former high school agriculture teacher in Pittsburg, he has a bachelor's degree in agricultural education from Texas A&M and runs a cleaning service company with his wife.

Richard "Kinky" Friedman, 65, is a musician and author who shares his family ranch in Medina with a summer youth camp. He ran as an independent in an unorthodox campaign for governor in 2006. He was also briefly in the race for governor last year. Friedman has written numerous mystery novels and worked as a columnist for *Texas Monthly* magazine. He also runs an animal rescue ranch near his home. He credits his foray into agriculture to a two-year Peace Corps stint in Borneo in the 1960s. He has a degree in psychology from the [University of Texas at Austin](#).

THE ISSUES

Water: Concern is growing about the state's long-term water resources. Gilbert wants to establish desalinization plants along the Texas coast and exchange wind energy for water from neighboring states. Friedman is advocating water conservation programs.

Food safety: An outbreak of salmonella stemming from a Texas peanut processing plant last year has brought attention to food safety, which include pesticide contamination.

[Eminent domain:](#) Both candidates are focusing on the encroachment of toll roads on farmers' land. Both oppose the Trans-Texas Corridor, a now-canceled plan for a network of toll roads.

THE POSITION

The agriculture commissioner is responsible for initiatives surrounding consumer protection, healthy living and rural economic development, and advocacy for Texas

farmers and ranchers. To be eligible, one must have been involved in the agriculture business for at least five of the past 10 years. The position pays \$137,500 a year.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The winner faces a tough battle against Republican incumbent Todd Staples in the fall. Staples, a real estate appraiser and rancher from [Palestine](#), is finishing his first term as agriculture commissioner. He's spent more than a decade serving as a state representative and then a state senator.

OTHER STATEWIDE PRIMARIES IN TEXAS

LAND COMMISSIONER

Democrats **Hector Uribe**, 64, a former state senator from Austin, and [Bill Burton](#), 54, a real estate broker and educator from [Athens](#), square off in the primary. The winner will face Republican incumbent **Jerry Patterson**, 63, of Austin.

RAILROAD COMMISSIONER

Republican incumbent **Victor Carrillo**, 45, of Austin faces challenger [David Porter](#), 53, a Giddings accountant. The winner will take on Democrat **Jeff Weems**, 51, a [Houston](#) lawyer.

TEXAS SUPREME COURT

Place 3: Republicans **Jeff Brown**, 39, an appellate judge from Houston; **Rick Green**, 38, an attorney and author from Dripping Springs; **Debra Lehrmann**, 53, a district judge from Colleyville; **Jim Moseley**, 55, an appellate judge from Coppell; **Rebecca Simmons**, 53, an appellate judge from [San Antonio](#); and **Rick Strange**, 50, an appellate judge from Midland, are competing for the nomination. The winner will face Democrat **Jim Sharp**, 57, an appellate judge from Houston.

Place 9: Incumbent Republican **Eva Guzman**, 49, of Cypress faces **Rose Vela**, 45, an appellate judge from Corpus Christi, in the GOP primary. The winner will face Democrat **Blake Bailey**, 63, a lawyer from Tyler.

Note: Two major statewide races – for attorney general and comptroller – have no contested primaries. For attorney general, Republican incumbent [Greg Abbott](#) will take on Democratic challenger Barbara Ann Radnofsky this fall. Comptroller Susan Combs has drawn no primary opponent nor major-party challenger for the fall.

From staff reports