

Regional Transportation Council to continue calling for higher taxes for roads, rail

12:29 AM CDT on Friday, July 16, 2010

By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER / The Dallas Morning News

North Texas officials say they will once again ask lawmakers to support higher taxes for roads and rail, despite setbacks in three straight previous legislative sessions.

Also Online

[Blog: Transpotation](#)

Their determination also comes as their most powerful ally in Austin said this week that the odds are so long against such legislation passing in 2011 that he has turned his focus to other matters.

The Dallas area simply needs the additional taxes for transportation too badly to give up, even without the support of longtime champion Sen. [John Carona](#), R-Dallas, Regional Transportation Council chairman Ron Natinsky said Thursday.

"Obviously, if he is reading the tea leaves and doesn't see any support, that doesn't bode well for us," said Natinsky, a [Dallas City Council](#) member.

"But we're going ahead. Whether the Legislature has the gumption to go along, I don't know. But if they want to let transportation in the state of Texas fall apart, that will be their choice."

Operating from his powerful post as chairman of the Senate transportation and homeland security committee, Carona had led the unsuccessful fight for legislation permitting higher transportation taxes in each of the past three sessions.

Two years ago, he won passage of the controversial local-option transportation tax bill in the Senate, only to see it die in the House at the last minute amid a stormy close of the 2009 session.

"Transportation finance will be just as big a challenge to get passed in the House as it has been before," Carona said Thursday. And without the support of Gov. [Rick Perry](#) or House Speaker Joe Straus, he said he sees little or no chance it will fare any better in 2011 than it did last year.

For that reason, he said, he welcomed the decision this week by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst to reassign him to the business and commerce committee, and said his focus will change for the 2011 session.

"Because of my high seniority in the Senate, I made it clear I want to work on issues where I know I will have the opportunity to make a significant impact," Carona said.

Natinsky said higher gasoline taxes are necessary, and would be accepted by voters in North Texas, if for no other reason because they'd help reduce the need for toll roads.

Even a 10- or 20-cent gasoline tax increase would hit drivers more gently than more toll roads, he said.

A driver who drives 15,000 miles might buy 600 gallons of gas a year, he noted. A 10-cent per gallon tax increase would mean just an extra \$60 a year for that driver – far less than what a toll user in North Texas pays.

"I spend \$600 to \$700 a month on my TollTag account," he said. "Toll roads are by their nature more expensive ways to build roads than building them if the state simply built them" with tax dollars.

Natinsky conceded that no amount of gasoline tax increase would remove the toll roads already in place here, but he said new revenue could help slow their expansion.

[Rowlett](#) Mayor John Harper said he's convinced that regional leaders need to lower their expectations.

"We have been trying to take too big a bite out of the apple to fully digest it," he said.

Amanda Wilson, who helps pull together the RTC's legislative agenda, said it's early yet.

Members won't vote until November on specific requests, and she said the plan for now is to stay loose. "What we heard to do is be more general, less specific. I think they want us to be flexible," she said.

In other business, transportation director [Michael Morris](#) of the North Central Texas Council of Governments said the council is working with the [National Football League](#) to develop an advanced reservation system that will allow area residents to sign up early for a spot on [DART](#) light rail service to the Dallas Convention Center. That's where the NFL Experience will be held in the week leading up to the [Super Bowl](#) in February.

In addition, he said fans headed to the game – which he said will mostly be out-of-towners – should be able to ride the Trinity Railway Express on special Super Bowl Sunday service, and take a shuttle to [Cowboys Stadium](#).

He also said the council of governments is finalizing a regionwide licensing scheme for limousines, rather than the city-by-city registrations required now. Morris said 500 or more limousines are expected for Super Bowl Sunday, and 300 more will be on hand for the events leading up to the game.

