

Editorial: Keeping local-option simple

05:34 PM CST on Friday, January 15, 2010

The last time North Texas leaders went to the Legislature looking for ways to improve transportation, the pitch turned out to be a smorgasbord of voter-approved possibilities to pay for it.

The concept was complex, and some mayors and other members of the policy-setting Regional Transportation Council doubted they could go back and explain the array of fees and taxes to their communities.

It was even harder to explain and sell the plan to distracted lawmakers in Austin, and the proposal hit a brick wall in the Texas House.

Next year must be different if local transportation officials want to expand the region's rail transit network and make big inroads in the fight against traffic congestion.

The current RTC chairman, Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, favors a streamlined approach that focuses on letting local voters decide on a gas tax, or perhaps a registration fee, to raise more money for rail and roads.

That focus is the right starting point to get a proposal groomed for the lawmaking session that starts in less than a year.

In an interview for this newspaper's Dallas Transportation blog, Whitley pointed to other steps that regional leaders are taking so they won't fall short on the local-option goal in the third consecutive lawmaking session.

A key one is engaging leaders from other urban areas early on. Their problems are the same: choking traffic congestion and too little money from Austin to fight it. Their solutions are the same: raising money locally, with voter approval.

Last year, Dallas-Fort Worth leaders had a head start in working the Legislature, but then other cities joined in, added their own ideas in mid-session and further complicated the proposal.

We're pleased to see that things are different now. Leaders from metro areas statewide are already working to form a joint effort to present to lawmakers.

The Legislature's transportation chairmen – Dallas' John Carona in the Senate and El Paso's Joe Pickett in the House – want to raise Texas' 20-cent gas tax to keep up the state-wide road network. The need for extra money is indisputable if the state wants first-class highways.

Both Carona and Pickett also want to give metro areas the flexibility to raise even more to pay for local priorities – such as expanding rail transit or major highway projects – that the state couldn't afford.

In another positive sign, the two chairmen are planning joint committee meetings to come together on a strategy.

If only other leaders were so engaged.

Last session we heard complaints from some legislators that they hadn't been consulted on North Texas' local-option plan, that they heard details only at the last minute. This squawking came even though the 39-member RTC – mostly locally elected officials – had spent a year in a very public planning process on funding rail and roads.

The lawmakers who complained last year should take more initiative in advance of the 2011 session, not just wait for someone to come calling. Better transportation is a regional imperative, and state lawmakers should act accordingly.

If anyone wants details about ideas local officials have on regional transportation, Whitley has them. In Dallas, City Council member Ron Natinsky, vice chairman of the RTC, could help.

Here are their numbers:

- Whitley: 817-884-1441
- Natinsky: 214-670-4067 • Keep the local option simple and focused.
- The gas tax is a good starting point.
- Work with other metro areas.
- Get engagement from local lawmakers.

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/editorials/stories/DN-whitley_17edi.State.Edition1.2ccfdff.html