

Editorial: Transit innovation

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Expanding the reach of rail transit in North Texas will take progress big and small on multiple fronts. Here are a couple of areas where things are quietly heading the right way:

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In Austin – House Speaker Joe Straus officially invited ideas on new ways of paying for transportation projects. The speaker announced special committees last week to study needs and report to him on, among other things, "using alternative funding options at the state and local levels."

That was the right move. A bill to permit local-option elections on transportation funding crashed and burned spectacularly in the House last year. Straus' leadership team now must sort through possibilities for solving the inarguable problem of urban traffic congestion.

Traffic planners maintain that expanded rail transit is a must, and this newspaper agrees. Last year's local-option bill would have given voters a say on paying for new transit projects as well as badly needed urban roadways.

Lawmakers in both parties are also making a strong case for raising the motor-fuels tax for the first time since 1991, but any such revenue could go only to roads, not rail, under current law.

That's where the special House committees come in. The speaker's proclamation last week also used the words "innovative approaches," and it couldn't have been said better. Innovation in solving traffic congestion is what transportation leaders in North Texas have been pushing for. It's good to see Straus expressing interest in more of that.

In North Texas– A coalition of cities and transportation agencies has stepped up efforts to develop the long-proposed east-west Cotton Belt rail link to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. It would connect northern suburbs and [North Dallas](#) to the airport and run through downtown Fort Worth. DART owns the Cotton Belt right of way but doesn't have the money to put the project together.

Again, innovation is called for. The North Central Texas Council of Governments is finishing a report on ways the six cities on the east side of the airport can team up with property owners and DART to start the new line.

For example, developers might be interested in sharing construction costs if passenger stations were located on their land. The University of Texas at Dallas might want to hire a developer to build a station and amenities on campus.

One audacious idea under discussion is encouraging a manufacturer to locate along the Cotton Belt and produce the next generation of diesel rail cars, which are in demand nationwide for new transit lines.

Ultimately, voter-approved money may be needed to put this project over the top. But since nothing is guaranteed out of Austin, North Texas leaders are smart to look for creative ways to achieve the goal of a seamless regional rail network.