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Early look at new Texas transportation plan



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Here are the outlines of a new state/local transportation funding proposal being shaped in talks among major metro transportation leaders for Texas' 2011 legislative session.

It's "bold" by design and "large enough to make a difference," says Vic Suhm, executive director of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition and senior consultant of the North Texas Commission.

The proposed [Omnibus Transportation Investment Act](#) would:

- Increase the state motor fuels tax by 10 cents a gallon
- Index the rate of the motor fuels tax to inflation
- Allow metropolitan counties to hold elections on local increases in the motor fuels tax of either 5 cents or 10 cents.
- Allow metropolitan counties to hold elections on an annual vehicle fee ranging from \$10 to \$60 a year.
- Prevent the Legislature from diverting highway funds to non-highway uses (such as the Department of Public Safety)

Separate legislation would re-authorize the state to enter into public-private partnerships to develop toll roads.

There would two constitutional amendments: One would allow local fuel taxes and local vehicle registration fees to be used for rail as well as roads; the other would allow fuel indexing and prevent diversions

Writes Suhm of the bill's direction:

The annual unfunded transportation needs are very large - \$8 billion statewide and \$3 billion in the North Texas region. Local option realistically addresses only about 20% of that need.

Some traditional transportation advocates don't enthusiastically endorse local option, some because they see it making passage of a statewide gas tax increase more difficult, some because they see it diluting or dispersing power now concentrated in Austin, and some because they don't support transit.

Piecemeal and incremental approaches to addressing the transportation funding crisis during past legislative sessions have not succeeded. Supporters of one solution work against supporters of another solution - transportation advocates are divided rather than unified - and the anti-tax interests prevail.

It's time to change our approach - we have far more to gain than to lose. We need a bold approach to make transportation a real legislative priority. If we keep doing what we've been doing, why should we expect a different outcome?

We need to develop and champion an omnibus transportation investment act...something large enough to make a difference, something bold enough to attract attention.

Anything like this happens only if the governor -- whoever it is -- gets behind it.

It would take the most political courage to back the statewide fuel tax. Letting local voters have their say is a safer, no-brainer thing. As pointed out yesterday, **transportation does well at the polls**.

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