

OPINIONS

Stuck in Traffic? Gridlock affects business in North Texas

BY MAC CHURCHILL

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If you travel along the Interstate 35W corridor between Fort Worth and Denton County, or along the Interstate 820-Airport Freeway corridor, you are very familiar with traffic. More specifically, you are familiar with sitting in traffic.

Gridlock affects our businesses' bottom line by causing significant delays in receiving and distributing goods. Our employees' quality of life – as well as our own – is dramatically affected.

My business is located at the intersection of I-35W and Loop 820. I know all too well how bad traffic can get – all I need to do is look out my windows and witness the glacial crawl along the corridor. This frustrates employees and customers every day. Customers avoid gridlock whenever possible; new homebuyers and businesses buy in other areas without congestion.

So the question is: why are we stuck in traffic?

The Fort Worth region is currently the fastest-growing region in the United States, and estimates are that our population will only continue to grow in the next 20 years, reaching more than 9 million in 2030.

What this means is that there are – and will continue to be – many more people and cars on the roads than capacity can accommodate. Simple math tells you that we will continue to be stuck in traffic – and for much longer periods of time – unless we start to identify solutions today.

So, what about the gas taxes the state collects? Shouldn't the taxes on the fuel we purchase generate enough revenues to support our transportation needs today and in the future?

Unfortunately, they do not.

Gas tax revenues – the largest source of funding for our transportation needs – have not kept pace with rising roadway maintenance and construction costs and are actually declining now. When fuel prices go way up, people adapt – driving less, taking mass transit or purchasing more fuel-efficient cars that consume less gas and therefore generate less tax revenue. Gas tax revenue goes up only when

more gallons of fuel are purchased, not when gas prices go up, so transportation funding from this revenue source will decline further as federal fuel efficiency standards increase.

Furthermore, the gas tax in the state of Texas has not been raised since 1991, which has limited the purchasing power of the Texas Department of Transportation as it plans for new infrastructure development. Think of it this way: If you still earned the same amount of money as you did in 1991, while the costs of goods and services continued to rise significantly, you would have much less money to pay for what your family needs at today's costs.

Compounding the problem, 40 percent of gas tax revenues are used to fund public education and public safety, leaving only 60 percent to fund roadway maintenance and construction.

The stark fact is this: Over the last 10 years, TxDOT has spent approximately \$400 million per year on transportation projects in our region. Unless the Legislature provides more revenue for transportation than it does now, we will have that amount only for the next 11 years combined. This means that North Texas will have enough money to fund one large interchange project over the next decade and little else. And without new revenue, there will be no new funding for added transportation capacity projects in Texas after 2012.

So what do we do about it?

Talk to your state representative and state senator – they are the ones who allocate revenues to fund transportation. Let them know how gridlock affects your life and your business, and tell them that you are willing to pay a little more for better service. They must demonstrate the leadership and willpower to enable greater financial investment in highways and other modes of transportation our region so desperately needs.

The future of our region and our quality of life are at stake, so we must act now. Otherwise, the cost of doing nothing will be staggering and insurmountable.

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