

# Star-Telegram

## Republican candidates for Texas governor attack each other over toll roads

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Usually the huge electronic signs along highways warn drivers of traffic jams and missing children.

But these days, the signs — or at least simulated ones — are featuring political barbs. The signs are centerpieces of campaign advertisements in the Republican gubernatorial primary, in which candidates are debating whether Texas should build toll roads and allow foreign investment in roads.

U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison's campaign began running ads last week showing a highway sign flashing messages critical of the defunct Trans-Texas Corridor, a favorite toll road project of Gov. Rick Perry. The governor's camp fired back with a similar ad on YouTube using highway sign images to criticize Hutchison for not explaining how she would pay for new roads.

Debra Medina, another GOP candidate, is not running toll-road-specific ads. But in campaign swings she has poked at Perry for pursuing foreign investment in toll roads and wondered why needed roads can't be built with current funding.

A veteran Republican strategist doubts that the toll road messages will sway many Republican voters. The ads also ignore that some of the state's largest highway projects, which many Dallas-Fort Worth commuters are eager to see completed, involve toll roads and foreign companies.

"This is not a clean-cut issue. It's true that Republicans don't like toll roads, but people forget where the Trans-Texas Corridor came from," said Royal Masset, former Texas Republican Party political director. "The libertarian wing [of the party] pushed toll roads because we believed toll roads to be more fair than raising taxes."

### Hutchison's position

In one of Hutchison's 30-second spots, messages on the sign repeat criticisms that Perry's opponents raised in the 2006 race.

"This is a free road, for now. Rick Perry wants it to be a toll road," a sign in the ad reads. "A giant Perry land grab. Like the 600,000 acres he tried to take from Texans. So a foreign company could charge tolls, too. It's time to end the Trans-Texas Corridor."

The ads don't refer to Hutchison's own transportation policies. In late December, she unveiled some of her plans to improve traffic but provided few details about funding them.

She supports development of toll roads and would allow public-private partnerships, in which investors can bring dollars to a project. But campaign spokesman Joe Pounder said: "It will not be her policy to aggressively put toll roads as the one and only option. Too many communities have been given a choice of toll roads or no roads."

Hutchison would also reform the Texas Department of Transportation and expand its commission from five members to nine. She said it's too early to identify new funding sources because the department would first have to be audited.

She also supports expansion of commuter rail and long-distance rail.

## **Perry's position**

Perry's ad quotes from recent news reports noting that Hutchison's transportation plan doesn't specify how to pay for road improvements. The ad includes a snippet of audio in which Hutchison says, "I don't think now is the time to talk about money."

"Texas receives only 70 cents back for every dollar we send to Washington for road construction," the sign reads. "Senator Hutchison Still Going the Wrong Way."

Perry campaign spokesman Mark Miner said Hutchison's ad proves that she's a Washington insider and doesn't have fresh ideas for Texas.

"The transportation policy she laid out has two parts. One is the same as the governor's, and the second part she can't pay for," Miner said. "This isn't like Washington, where you can spend money you don't have. You have to find money for the policies you propose."

## **Medina's position**

Medina, a former Republican Party chairwoman in South Texas' Wharton County and a frequent Tea Party speaker, opposes toll road contracts with foreign corporations. She wants an audit of the Transportation Department to identify why the agency can't do more with existing funding.

"There should be no discussion of any additional tax or spending allocated to Texas highways until the audit is complete and Texans are assured of sound fiscal management of transportation dollars," Medina spokeswoman Nelda Carrizales Skevington said in an e-mail.

## **Agency audits**

Although Hutchison and Medina called for an audit, the Transportation Department is already subject to periodic reviews by the state auditor's office.

Also, last year, the Legislature conducted a sunset review and put the department's leaders on a probation of sorts. Many management changes were recommended, and lawmakers refused to let the agency sign any more toll road agreements with developers.

Three North Texas projects with private developers are under way and exempt from the Legislature's ban:

DFW Connector: Construction begins Feb. 15 on the makeover of Texas 114/121 and other Grapevine highways. NorthGate Constructors is building the \$1.02 billion project with tax dollars and stimulus funds.

North Tarrant Express: A \$2 billion expansion of Loop 820, Airport Freeway and Interstate 35W will begin late this year. Cintra, a Spanish firm previously linked to the Trans-Texas Corridor, is the lead partner.

LBJ Managed Lanes: The reconstruction of Interstate 635 in Dallas is also being run by Cintra.

The Transportation Department also adopted a list of principles to ease the public's concerns about toll projects.

They state that highways must remain public property and that existing lanes cannot be tolled. Also, developers' contracts cannot contain noncompete clauses that prohibit improvements to highways that might take business away from toll roads.

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### **Democrats and toll roads**

So far, it's mostly Republican candidates for governor who are criticizing one another's positions on toll roads. But here are Democratic candidates' views:

**Alma L. Aguado** — The San Antonio physician supports construction of an Interstate 35 "tollway twin" from San Antonio to Oklahoma and I-69 from Brownsville to Texarkana. She also calls for keeping public ownership of toll roads "so the revenue can be invested in more roads instead of the profits to be diverted to other countries' investors," according to her Web site.

**Felix Alvarado** — The Fort Worth educator's position has not been made clear.

**Bill Dear** — The Mount Calm private investigator opposes the Trans-Texas Corridor and supports toll roads "only out of the necessity to pay for the road's construction," he said by e-mail. Contractors building or operating Texas roads should be Texas-based, he said.

**Clement Glenn** — The Navasota professor's position has not been made clear.

**Star Locke** — The Harlingen/Port Aransas rancher and builder states on his Web site that the Trans-Texas Corridor would "cut Texas in half by confiscating private property."

**Farouk Shami** — The Houston hair-care magnate plans to unveil his transportation plan Wednesday. He's adamantly opposed to privatizing toll projects, spokeswoman Kelly Love Johnson said.

**Bill White** — In a recent speech, the former Houston mayor criticized Perry's promotion of the Trans-Texas Corridor, which White said would have trampled Texans' property rights.

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