

# Star-Telegram

## Local-option taxes, fees get little support in region

Posted Sunday, Feb. 14, 2010

BY AMAN BATHEJA

[abatheja@star-telegram.com](mailto:abatheja@star-telegram.com)

A local-option transportation funding measure endorsed by many regional officials has far lower support among Fort Worth-area voters than the rest of the state, according to a poll conducted for the *Star-Telegram* and four other Texas newspapers.

In the telephone poll of 1,508 registered voters conducted between Feb. 2 and Wednesday, poll respondents were asked how Texas should pay for more needed highway construction and were given five options.

No one option emerged as a clear favorite. Statewide, increasing toll roads got the most backing, with 20.5 percent support. That was followed by borrowing money using state bonds, 16.9 percent, and increasing the state gas tax, 16.2 percent. Using a local-option gas tax came in fifth, with 9.6 percent support statewide.

Among respondents from Tarrant, Parker, and Johnson counties, the local option got just 3.9 percent support.

The local-option bill failed in the 2009 legislative session despite a coordinated push from many North Texas elected officials, and an effort in support of a new bill is expected when the Legislature convenes in January. It would allow local entities to hold elections on various tax and fee increases to fund area transportation projects, including overhauling roads and enhancing public transportation.

The low rating of the local option among area Republicans in the poll underscores why it has become a campaign issue in several local primary races.

In races for the state House and at the county level, incumbents are attacked for having supported the measure. In most of the races, challengers argue that more funding can be found by stopping diversions of the gas tax into other parts of the state budget.

Bill Miller, a founder of HillCo, an Austin lobbying firm hired to help pass the bill, said his firm conducted its own poll on the local option last year and found support "very high."

He said that poll made clear to respondents that the tax or fee increases could only be implemented by voter approval.

"We were able to walk each respondent through how it worked, and when we did that, the numbers [in support of the measure] were very high," Miller said.

The results showcase the difficult politics of transportation funding in Texas. Candidates for governor and other offices have spent weeks criticizing the use of toll roads or raising taxes to

build more roads. Yet, some 37 percent of voters prefer one of those measures to address the issue.

AMAN BATHEJA, 817-390-7695