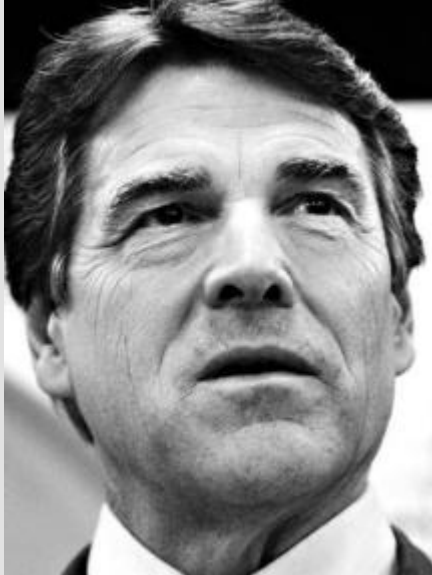


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## Transportation strategies mapped out

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**By Josh Baugh** - Express-News

Eight years ago, Gov. Rick Perry unveiled a plan for a 4,000-mile network of transportation corridors that he said would cut air pollution and unclog roadways in a state once known for its superior highway system.

Composed of toll roads, rail and utility lines, the Trans-Texas Corridor was supposed to cut 1,200-foot-wide swaths through private property across the state, costing \$175 billion to build over a half-century. It became one of Perry's most ambitious and important political issues.

Now, as Perry seeks an unprecedented third term as governor, it's his biggest liability.

After waging war for years against the plan and its would-be agents — Perry and the Texas Department of Transportation — outraged activists brought the Trans-Texas Corridor to its knees. During a recently televised GOP gubernatorial debate, Perry said his plans for the corridor are dead.

But it still does exist, if only in state law.

Killing it "once and for all" has become a battle cry for Perry's opponents on both sides of the aisle.

Republican challengers Debra Medina and Kay Bailey Hutchison and Democratic hopefuls Bill White and Farouk Shami have said they would repeal the provisions in state law that give TxDOT the ability to build the Trans-Texas Corridor.

"The whole philosophy of the Trans-Texas Corridor is still alive and well," Hutchison said during the same debate that Perry declared the plan dead. "TxDOT says to local officials, 'You have to have a toll road if you want state money.' That's how they're doling out state money."

Perry defends his support for the plan.

"I don't think it was a mistake at all to have a vision of how to move people and produce safely and expeditiously in the state of Texas," he said during the debate. "Unfortunately, for too many years we had legislatures and governors who kicked the can down the road, if you will, and Texas highways became congested."

### **Funding debate**

Perry's idea was to negotiate "exclusive development agreements" with private-sector companies to build and operate toll roads.

Proponents say it's a way to finance the construction of much-needed infrastructure when the state can't afford it. Opponents say it's the most expensive way to build roads, and that it's merely selling off the state's infrastructure to the highest bidder.

Those deals, generally known now as "comprehensive development agreements," or CDAs, have a tenuous future. The authority to use one kind of CDA expired last year, and another is set to expire in 2011.

Perry unsuccessfully sought to extend CDA authority during a special legislative session in July, when TxDOT officials said they're a necessary financing tool for building new roads.

Hutchison said public-private partnerships have a place in highway construction. But she opposes how they've been structured in the past, saying they take local governments' rights to improve nearby freeways or increase speed limits on those roads.

"I think toll roads have a place," Hutchison said. "I think they have been vastly overused, and with a heavy hand in Gov. Perry's nine years, with his appointees to the highway commission. Toll roads with local initiative, as we have in Houston, I think can be productive."

In her transportation policy, Hutchison also calls for giving communities the right to choose whether they want toll roads, and for developing high-speed commuter rail service in Texas.

Perry's campaign has attacked Hutchison's transportation policy as lacking a way to pay for her plan.

Mark Miner, Perry's spokesman, said the governor's plan is TxDOT's.

"TxDOT is implementing a plan that it is paying for, and you're not going to see the governor come out there with a transportation plan just to get through an election," Miner said. "He has TxDOT, they're implementing a plan, and it's working."

Miner said the governor worked to end diversions from the gas tax during the 2009 Legislature, returning \$300 million back to the highway coffers. The state has road priorities, he said, and Perry is addressing them.

"Texas has built more roadways than any other state. And (Perry) also realizes and understands that more work needs to be done to meet our infrastructure needs," Miner said.

TxDOT has said that by 2012, the agency will have no money for new roads, and within two to three years, its maintenance budget won't be enough to maintain Texas' existing roadway network. But some officials have speculated that TxDOT's doomsday projections have been inflated to underscore the need for Perry's push for privatized toll roads.

Recently, some leaders have called for increasing and indexing the state gas tax, which hasn't been adjusted since 1991.

However, some lawmakers have questioned whether TxDOT actually is in the dire straits it claims, or if the agency has exaggerated its dim future to underscore the need for more privatized toll roads.

Hutchison and Medina question the validity of TxDOT's claims, saying the agency lacks transparency and public trust.

"My first priority is going to be to restore the integrity of TxDOT, and I want an audit of TxDOT," Hutchison said.

Medina, a conservative activist from Wharton, said she wants to stop sending federal gas tax collected at Texas pumps to Washington, D.C.

### **Cash for roads**

In 2008, when Texas received its 2006 gas tax revenue from the federal government, it got 82.2 cents for every dollar sent, and 8.5 cents of that is dedicated to mass transit.

Medina said she would address Texas' shortfall in road-construction funds — if there is one — by keeping Texas' gas tax dollars in the state.

"The fuel tax dollars flow through the comptroller's office," Medina said. "I think they ought to stop in the comptroller's office. I don't think they ought to go to Washington, D.C., and I think we ought to be prepared to take that fight."

She also said she would reprogram the transit funds to highway construction and accused Hutchison's transportation plan — with its multimodal focus — of being similar to Perry's Trans-Texas Corridor.

In the Democratic primary, former Houston Mayor Bill White said he would phase out diversions from the gas tax. He also wants to decentralize TxDOT and give more planning authority to TxDOT's district offices, along with local governments.

White wants to end the use of public-private partnerships for building big highway projects. He's not outright against tolling, though he said he's against TxDOT imposing tolls on communities that don't want them.

"I think each local community should decide on its own what kind of financing they want," he said.

Hair-product magnate Farouk Shami is the only candidate campaigning on increasing and indexing the state's gas tax. It's a far more affordable way to build roads than by tolling them, according to his campaign.

He also advocates restructuring the Texas Transportation Commission, which oversees TxDOT. Currently, the governor appoints the five-member panel. Shami has suggested that it would function better if it were a 14-member elected board.

Hutchison also advocates growing the size of the commission, though she would retain her ability to appoint members.