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
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Roads bond vote may hinge on who voters believe

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

Both sides in Hays County's highway bond proposal are pointed to road funding wrangling in Austin and Washington as confirmation that voters should, or should not, approve \$172 million in new debt to pay for the projects.

On Monday, the state auditor said the Texas Department of Transportation's projected \$86 billion shortfall in transportation needs through 2030 "may not be reliable for making policy or funding decisions." At least \$8.6 billion of the estimate was an outright error, the audit said, and \$27.9 billion in needs identified by eight local metropolitan planning organization could not be documented. Another \$9 billion was questionable because of crude projection methods used by TxDOT, the report said.

State and local officials have repeatedly said the gap puts the burden on local governments to come up with ways to fund needed projects. In Hays County, property owners will pay upfront for the \$172 million and be reimbursed up to \$133.3 million over 20 years if Prop. 1 passes on May 12. A second proposition would authorize \$30 million to buy and preserve parkland and open space.

A day after the audit was released, TxDOT's Austin district engineer Bob Daigh turned up at the Hays County commissioners court to say — again — that the arrangement as negotiated is the best residents can expect from the cash-strapped agency. Gasoline tax revenue is not keeping pace with road needs, he said, and the Federal Highway Administration has already slashed TxDOT's funding by \$600 million and told the agency it can expect more.

Without the agreement, he said, residents could wait years, if not decades, before they see added lanes to a 10.3-mile stretch of Ranch Road 12 and a six-mile stretch of Farm-to-Market Road 1626; shoulders and turn lanes on Texas 21; and a new three-mile segment of Farm-to-Market Road 110, the San Marcos loop.

"This is one of the last pass-through tolling agreements and it will be honored. If the pass-through toll program fails, given the state of federal funding, it would be reasonable to expect improvements to these roads would be delayed or deferred for a very long time," Daigh told a reporter after the meeting.

"Pass-through tolling" is a system in which the state pays back local governments based on how many vehicle miles are logged on the new or improved roads; none of the projects in Hays County are traditional toll roads where drivers pay at a booth or with a toll tag.

Not to be outmaneuvered, bond opponents had prepared a response to Daigh's comments a full six hours before he even appeared at the meeting, according to a facsimile time stamp on the statement from former Wimberley Mayor Steve Klepfer.

"The idea that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is not true. TxDOT will come back and build a road that meets their needs and meets the community's needs," Klepfer said. "I find this type of intergovernmental blackmail amusing and arrogant and it seems others in leadership across the state are feeling the same way about TxDOT as late."




In many ways, the effort to improve safety and mobility in Hays County has from the start tracked a parallel, broader discussion in the state house about how to pay for roads.

Reacting to TxDOT's estimates of critical transportation needs going unfunded, legislators in 2003 retooled the way TxDOT priorities are identified and funded. The legislation laid the groundwork for Gov. Rick Perry's Trans-Texas Corridor by, effectively, increasing reliance on toll roads and making it easier for the state to partner with private entities to build the roads. The bill also created the "pass-through tolling" system.

Hays County was one of the first local governments to get in line for the funding, looking to pay for highway projects included in a \$47 million road package approved by voters in 2001. About half that money was supposed to be earmarked for state roads, the other half for county roads. As the county roads portion of the package, however, busted through its budget — even as projects were cut or scaled down — the money set aside for partnering on the state projects dwindled.

By the time Pct. 3 Commissioner Will Conley took office in January 2005, only about \$5 million was uncommitted to other projects. It is rarely

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disputed, even by bond opponents, that the deal he negotiated with TxDOT is more favorable to the county than just about any of the dozen pass-through agreements won by other cities and counties, including the city of San Marcos.

When the county voter's replaced three Republican incumbents, including County Judge Jim Powers, with a new Democratic majority, it was apparent that the best road supporters could do was get it to the ballot.

For their part, TxDOT says the state auditor's report proves what they have been saying all along, that a multibillion dollar gap between anticipated money and anticipated needs means Texans who for decades have driven on one of the nation's best road systems have to adjust to a new reality.

"No matter what number you choose, Texas has a big problem: more people, in more cars, driving more miles on an already congested highway system," said Michael Behrens, TxDOT's executive director. "...We can all agree on one thing: The funding gap, no matter what anyone thinks it might be, is growing."

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