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Editorial: Transportation funding bill makes progress

In Wednesday's first legislative showdown over giving voters a chance to fund local transportation improvements, the ayes clearly were in the majority.

Admittedly, that might have been because most of the no's chose not to fight in a Senate committee room packed with supporters of the idea. Detractors are using the Internet to pound Dallas Sen. John Carona's Texas Local Option Transportation Act, SB855.

The gist of the opposition is that government spending, and the taxes that enable it, are bad. Gee, what a stroke of insight.

The counter-argument is that daily traffic gridlock and air pollution are also bad. Why not let local voters decide which they hate more — particularly since the "no new tax" group has choked off opportunities for better state funding of needed transportation improvements in major urban areas like Dallas-Fort Worth.

Local funding options are the goal of SB855 and its House companion, HB9, sponsored by Rep. Vicki Truitt of Keller. It's a concept that this Editorial Board has supported for years. The initial hearing on the draft bill in Carona's Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee was encouraging.

Still, even Carona admits that the bill needs more work, and he is inviting anyone with ideas for improving it to contact the committee's staff in Austin. Carona is pushing to bring the bill to an up-or-down committee vote next Wednesday. The real battle, if there is to be one, probably will come later on the Senate floor.

Funding options

The draft bill sets up a process for naming a countywide "project selection and ballot committee" of local elected officials who would examine projects that the region's transportation plan deems necessary to meet projected population growth. In Tarrant County, those projects are expected mainly to be expanded passenger rail lines on existing tracks. In Dallas County, which already has a growing light rail system, more road improvements might be selected.

The committee's membership is to be based principally on city population. Tarrant County's committee would include two county commissioners; two elected officials from Fort Worth and one each from the county's four next-largest cities (Arlington, North Richland Hills, Euless and Bedford); one from either Grapevine, Haltom City, Hurst or Keller; one from a city with less than 35,000 residents; and one from the governing board of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority.

Funding options have changed little from those developed by the Regional Transportation Council in meetings held during the past year. They include a motor fuel tax, a "mobility improvement fee" to be added to the cost of vehicle registration renewals, a parking management fee for lots or garages owned by a county or a municipality, a motor vehicle emissions fee, a driver's license renewal fee and a new resident impact fee.

Under the draft bill, the project selection and ballot committee would pick projects, choose from the available funding options, set the amount to be charged under each selected option and detail all of those choices on a ballot that would go before county voters in November 2010.

A poll conducted by advocates of Carona's bill showed that North Texas residents would be willing to pay \$50, \$75 or maybe even \$100 a year in new taxes and fees for projects that would relieve traffic congestion.

The best parts

The bill's primary strength is local control, right down to putting the ultimate decision in the hands of county voters.

The process would be transparent throughout. Besides spelling out individual projects, their costs and specific funding methods on the ballot, the county would keep the money raised for each project in a separate account. Information on those accounts must be posted on the county's Web site at least annually.

A suggestion: The county should post each account's checkbook online monthly, showing how much money is coming in and exactly how it is being spent.

Making the bill better

The election timetable is troublesome. The strongest part of the anti-tax argument is that the current economic recession puts a dark cloud over asking voters to commit themselves to more spending, no matter how good the cause. County commissioners should be able to change the timetable if the economy doesn't improve.

The bill calls on county commissioners to provide low-income residents with relief from the new taxes and fees. That's good, but state Sen. Rodney Ellis of Houston points out that this provision is scant on details. That must be fixed.

Significant concerns have been raised about the administrative procedures to be followed if counties pick an additional motor fuel tax as a funding option. Local fuel retailers don't want to be responsible for the tax collection and paperwork, but the alternative of joining the local tax collection with the state's existing fuel tax collection process could result in loss of revenue to Austin's bureaucracy.

Finally, there must be a way to keep the fuel tax uniform throughout the region so that retailers on one side of a county line aren't forced to charge a higher price than their competitors on the other side.

On the whole, Carona has offered up a good bill that could help ease the transportation mess in North Texas. There is time to make the bill even better before the legislative session ends June 1.