

# Fort★Worth BusinessPress

## Local option transportation bill will face challenge in Texas House

BY LESLIE WIMMER

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The Texas Local Option Transportation Act passed through the State Senate's Transportation Committee, and area transportation officials believe the bill will face challenges in the House of Representatives.

Officials at the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition said they expect the bill to pass in the State Senate, but added they do expect trouble getting the bill through the House because of tight party lines and misinformation on the bill's specifics.

A State Senate vote on the bill was expected after the *Business Press*' deadline.

"We've got a lot of work ahead, we're essentially halfway through the legislative session," said Jungus Jordan, Fort Worth City Council member representing District 6, at the Transportation Coalition's April 1 meeting. "We need to continue to speak with one voice with all the members in the House. If we don't demonstrate that we are united, they will drive a truck through our issue, no pun intended. Well, maybe I should have said drive a train through our issue."

Some challenges against the bill in the House will come from misinformation from opponents to the bill and the fact supporters will need to convince more members in the House for the bill to pass, officials said.

One group opposing the bill is Austin-based Empower Texans, an organization

following Texas economic and fiscal issues.

In a March 18 post on the organization's Web site, Empower Texans President and CEO Michael Quinn Sullivan called the Transportation Act a "massive tax-hike and fee-grab bill."

"Senate Bill 855 – promoted by taxpayer-funded lobbyists, liberal activists and others who profit off the taxpayer – would raise and create a half-dozen new taxes and fees initially just on folks in Dallas-Fort Worth," Sullivan wrote in the post. "That during the worst economic crisis in decades."

Sullivan added in the post that any elections held for voters to choose funding sources for transportation projects could be held with small turn outs, which gives cities incentives to hold elections on days "designed to disenfranchise voters," he said in the post.

Jordan said the intent of the bill is not to raise taxes across the board, and that counties can choose to delay votes until the economy is stronger.

"The bill would allow counties to make a provision to postpone an election to a better economic time," Jordan said. "The real bottom line is we are not asking for the authority to increase taxes. We're asking for the authority to go to our voters for bond packages with a funding plan, and ask them to both approve the project and the funding plan, and how the revenue is generated. The voter will have the ultimate say, and I think that's really the misinformation."

Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief said at the Coalition meeting that the bill would probably be changed in the House where representatives can add amendments, and added that some of the challenges in the House will come from a combination of tight party lines and issues surrounding new House Speaker Joe Straus.

“Those bills that have momentum now will maintain momentum, the good news is ours is one of them,” Moncrief said at the meeting. “Will it come out the same as we put it in? Probably not.”

Moncrief added that Straus, a Republican representing San Antonio, wanted his district to be included in the Act, which may come up as a conflict should the House vote against the bill.

The House “is a dangerous place because you have a close [party] margin on both sides, you have a new speaker and he wants in the bill,” Moncrief said. Straus’ “first responsibility is to his district, but he has another responsibility and that’s to his members.”

State Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, introduced the Act in early February as Senate Bill 855.

The bill aims to give counties the option of providing residents with a list of needed mobility and transportation projects, and a variety of funding options to choose from to pay for those projects. Voters would vote on the funding options in a bond-style election.

Counties would also have to provide voters the estimated total cost and completion date for each project.

Locally, transportation officials have come up with a list of funding options including a drivers license fee, a vehicle registration fee, a new resident impact fee, a mileage fee and a motor fuels tax.

Should the bill pass through the legislature, the Rail North Texas project would be

on the list of needed transit projects in North Texas.

Rail North Texas is a 250-mile spread of commuter rail that would cross six counties and be fully operational by 2030 should plans stay on track. The project is expected to cost about \$47 billion.

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