



Rail North Texas: legislature considers local option funding

Leslie Gibson

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— Rail North Texas — locally levied taxes and fees could support regional light rail projects, should the gist of several bill proposals pass the Texas legislature this session.

Receiving heavy local attention is Rail North Texas, proposed in Senate Bill 855, with HB 9 as the identical bill in the House of Representatives.

Senator John Carona of Dallas introduced SB 855, which is in the Transportation and Homeland Security Committee, possibly to be referred back out this week.

Rockwall County Judge Chris Florance is against it, noting in January, “This local option would provide a means for taxing our people but how it is spent would be determined by a regional authority.”

Rowlett Mayor John Harper supports it — “For the city of Rowlett to prosper, we need to be in the middle of all these mass transit opportunities,” he said in a separate February interview.

Hunt County County Judge John Horn supports a regional mobility plan he told a Herald-Banner reporter in a recent interview on transportation in general: “The primary goal that we are going to be looking at countywide is to establish a regional mobility plan that takes into consideration major junctions and roadways that are coming in from the west,” Horn told Chad Blackshear.

State Representative Jodie Laubenberg is adamantly against it. “I have a major problem with that bill, it is very vague,” she said in March.

As of press time, each bill is in that body’s transportation committee.

“That is not the place for it,” Rep. Laubenberg said in a recent interview. “It is a tax bill, it should be in the Ways and Means committee, she said.

As presented to the committees, the twin bills propose that voters in regions, or counties, depending upon interpretations, be able to vote to allow a locally-levied gas tax to increase each year, and/or to institute parking fees and new resident roadway impact fees, among other fees.

“Once we open this up, it will open up all over the state,” Laubenberg said, noting that several such proposals are before the house and senate.

“They tell you light rail will open up traffic, stop congestion, clear the air, but less than 1 percent of the of the population rides mass transit; you have to have 100 percent of the population paying to subsidize it. Plus, the cities are already paying 1 cent in those cities with mass transit — that would be double taxation,” she said.

Rep. Laubenberg began expressing strong disagreement in November, during a meeting of the Rockwall County Road Consortium, which did not pass a resolution of support for the measure.

At that time, it was being introduced in the Regional Transportation Council (RTC). The RTC sets transportation policy for the North Central Texas region, as it is authorized to do by the State. Members are officials of cities, counties and quasi-government transportation bodies, all of which lie in the state-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for this area, known as the North Central Texas Council of Governments. Other MPOs represent other parts of the state, and several have supported similar measures through their legislators this year, including that of San Antonio and of Houston.

In this region’s MPO, all but four RTC members voted to support Rail North Texas.

Rockwall County’s Florance, who represents Rockwall on the RTC, was one of the four naysayers.

“It is no secret DART is broke,” Florance said in a January interview, referring to Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority, of

which Rowlett is a member city; the county of Rockwall and its cities are not.

“DART type rail would cost from \$90 to \$100 million dollars a mile. If it takes approximately six-plus miles to connect to DART in Rowlett, that is over a half-billion dollars,” Florance said.

“RTC officials tell me that public/private partnerships would help fund the project. Who would possibly step up to the plate for that?” he asked.

“TxDoT, because of legislative re-appropriation, can’t even fix state roads and now we have to pick up the tab. We have been paying road taxes for years that have been diverted to other interests by the legislature,” he said.

“The people of Rockwall County have just passed a \$100 million road bond referendum, and I am not sure we can afford to approve more taxes, no matter what tools we use,” he said.

The HB 9 bill as presented includes as on funding mechanisms, subject to voter approval, a county-levied gas tax of 10 cents per gallon to be raised annually, through what Rep. Laubenberg said is a complicated formula putting it above the rate of inflation.

“You know how those votes are worded — it is very confusing on a ballot; does a yes mean a no?”

Fees in HB 9 would allow also include \$1 per hour parking fee, and a fee for renewal of drivers license, and a roadway impact fee on new residents of up to \$250.

“We already have an emissions fee,” Laubenberg said.

“Once we open the whole thing up, everything is fair game,” she said.

Taxing a person per mile driven is part of a similar bill, HB 1674, introduced by a San Antonio legislator.

Wording of bills changes as they move through committee and back out to the floor.

The language of SB 355 has already changed, noted Chief of Staff, Don Forse, for Sen. Bob Deuell, whose district includes Rockwall and Hunt Counties.

Forse said Wednesday that the office has heard different concerns from different parts of the district, which includes Rockwall County, located in the MPO, and Hunt County which is not, but slated to be. It will then share an RTC seat with Rockwall County.

“Hunt County is not in the MPO, but will be in the future — there is strong support from the local leadership,” Forse said.

Mayor John Harper of the City of Rowlett supports Rail North Texas specifically.

“The state has failed to provide sufficient funding. This is local option,” he said.

“DART rail is a catalyst for transit-oriented development. Downtown Rowlett is land-use planned for transit-oriented development,” Harper said.

“There are rail lines all the way to Hunt County. Rowlett is in Dallas and Rockwall Counties. We’re going to get light rail in Dallas County. I can’t get it extended unless Rockwall County votes to provide for it.”

If a particular county did not support a particular transit project, according to information from the NCTCOG Web site, the transit project in that area may have to be postponed or deleted.

Questions about Rail North Texas as conceived by the RTC are answered on the NCTCOG Web site, in the transportation section, which includes a section on Rail North Texas, and within that, “Frequently Asked Questions.”

Bills may be tracked in the state legislature, by going to “Texas Legislature On-Line.”

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