

OPINION Columns

[Comments](#) | Recommended 

Tom Spencer: We need to go back to paying our own way

11:11 PM CST on Saturday, January 28, 2012

Everybody wants to be happy;

Nobody wants to cry.

Everybody wants to go to heaven,

But nobody wants to die.



Tom Spencer

If anything describes the state of transportation funding in Texas and really the nation, that little ditty sure does the job.

The current reality check on transportation planning is being supplied to us by the Interstate 35E expansion project's funding mechanism in Senate Bill 1420. Local government officials lobbied hard to get the ability to enter into public-private partnerships to get the money to meet the construction needs for this declared federal interstate NAFTA highway. The Legislature reluctantly complied, because they've got no money for even a necessary project and the local pols have given them cover by passing multiple resolutions supporting the PPPs as the only realistic option for funding what is, at times, a 28-mile traffic jam on I-35E.

The RFIs — requests for information — for the I-35E project were returned to the Texas Department of Transportation and the private partners, saying there wasn't enough money in it for a private partnership: The traffic count projections were high, and the project as outlined by TxDOT won't work.

Business and TxDOT now say, "We build toll lanes first and then we will see if you get the counts that will allow something else. ..."

Now stakeholders are requesting RFQs — requests for qualifications — to find our best business partner. Who has the best business plan based on traffic counts? Spain? Israel? Or the Texas taxpayer?

There hasn't been enough money for adequate highway funding since at least 2000. In 2001, TxDOT said publicly that highway construction costs were increasing at 5 percent a year and funding was increasing at 2.5 percent. The state couldn't keep up with costs.

It has only gotten worse. Congestion and deteriorating roads and bridges will stifle economic growth and turn transportation headaches into nightmares.

Since 2001, we've had unpaid-for federal tax cuts and federal rescission of highway funds totaling at least \$1.265 billion from 2007-09. This taking back of funds resulted from the U.S. troop readiness, veterans care, Hurricane Katrina recovery and the Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act of 2007.

We have experienced the near-collapse of our economy in 2008 and are now suffering the greatest recession since the Great Depression. We have record population growth in our state and especially in North Texas. We have growth in industry, growth in jobs and growth in population, but no growth in taxes that would support that positive growth and the needed construction and reconstruction of our highway infrastructure.

"No new tax" is the mantra of the politicians of our state. The no-tax mantra is shortsighted and assumes there is no good and productive tax.

That is just not true. Some taxes save money in the long run.

There has been no increase in the gasoline tax of 20 cents per gallon in Texas since 1991. Gasoline prices have risen dramatically since that time, but they have been driven by increased world demand, increased cost of exploration and, recently, commodity speculators. Speculators look to take advantage of the price "spread" available in a high-demand commodity like petroleum. The less the spread in price available, the less chance for the price manipulation, and the action players will go to other commodities with higher profitability.

In the third week of November, gas went from \$3.08 a gallon to \$3.23 a gallon in one day on Swisher Road in Lake Dallas. A 15-cent swing in one day and it doesn't get a comment anywhere. Nothing. Not in the newspaper; not on TV; not in any discussion I heard anywhere.

The speculators and media have us used to such price swings. We don't complain anymore. Do you hear anyone complain? No, they just pump their gas and hurry on.

The state comptroller's website says that Texas collected more than \$3 billion in motor fuel taxes in fiscal 2010. At 20 cents per gallon, that means there were about 15 billion gallons sold. Raising the gas tax the same 15-cent increase and dedicating it to highway infrastructure would generate more than \$2.25 billion. That is \$2.25 billion TxDOT could leverage to benefit Texas taxpayers with not only better highway infrastructure, but with a return on our tax investment.

We may need to utilize toll roads, high-occupancy toll lanes and an assortment of fees on non-gas vehicles in our road building funding mechanisms, but we wouldn't need to let some foreign conglomerate use our tolls or the PPPs to provide a positive return on their bottom-line investment in Denton County.

We need to return to paying our own way. There are no free lunches. Remember the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike? The tolls paid for the road, and when the road was paid for, the tolls ceased.

Admittedly, we now wouldn't be able to quit collecting tolls. The tolls would continue to help pay for maintenance and other road construction. We could index tolls to the Consumer Price Index or some other indicator.

Where is the leadership in Texas that is willing to face up to our funding needs and a responsible economic policy? I haven't seen any — not at any level. Either we are responsible and learn to fund highways and to pay tolls to ourselves, or we will pay tolls to foreigners and agree to 50-year contracts that pay off their investments in 20 years.

We need to look for something that works, and history should be a good example. The motor fuel tax built our nation's highway infrastructure. Some taxes are good investments.

Not only would a dedicated fuel tax increase produce significant revenues, it might contribute to other positive investment consequences and cause people to look at other transportation options.

“Fiscal conservative” is a politically correct label used these days by our elected officials, but being fiscally responsible is more important and productive. It appears our elected officials are more motivated by ideology than they are by finding responsible and forward-looking solutions. All the politicians tout their leadership abilities, but none demonstrate any on this vital state issue.

Good infrastructure is critical to economic growth. A policy of no gas tax increases may win elections, but where infrastructure is concerned, it is a shortsighted, costly mistake for taxpayers.

TOM SPENCER of Shady Shores is a tree farmer and is active in transportation affairs.

 [Print](#)

Create A Screen Name

Screen names can only consist of letters and numbers.

Your screen name will appear to everyone.

NOTE: You cannot change, delete, or edit your screen name once you hit "Save".

[CHECK](#)

[CANCEL](#)

Leave Comment

Having problems seeing comments?

Supported Browsers

 Close

- Internet Explorer 7+
- FireFox 3+
- Safari

If you are using Internet Explorer 7, make sure Phishing Filter is turned off by going to Tools / Phishing Filter / Turn Off Automatic Website Checking.

If you are using Internet Explorer 8, make sure InPrivate Filtering is turned off and InPrivate Filtering data has been cleared. To turn off InPrivate Filtering go to Tools / InPrivate Filtering Settings, select the "off" button and click "OK".