

## Dewhurst has change of heart on highway funding



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3:11 PM on Tue., Mar. 22, 2011 | [Permalink](#)



The lieutenant governor made headlines -- and earned this newspaper's editorial support -- in January by promising to find new sources of revenue for highway building.

But things have changed with Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst. We're putting together an updated editorial on transportation today, so I asked Dewhurst's office for an update on his efforts. We got this email from spokesman Mike Walz:

Lt. Governor Dewhurst asked me to pass along this statement regarding transportation funding this session:

*With the fastest growing population in the country, Texas needs a revenue stream to build the highways necessary to transport people and products, reduce congestion, and continue to improve our air quality. However, now is not the time to increase taxes or fees on hardworking Texans, just as our economy is starting to rebound. I do support:*

- 1. reorganizing TXDoT to focus on priority highway construction and congestion relief*
- 2. using available revenues plus the \$3 billion Prop 12 bonds that were previously approved by Texas voters*

*3. prioritizing transportation projects in each urban area so we can determine the costs and begin the necessary planning and environmental impact studies.*

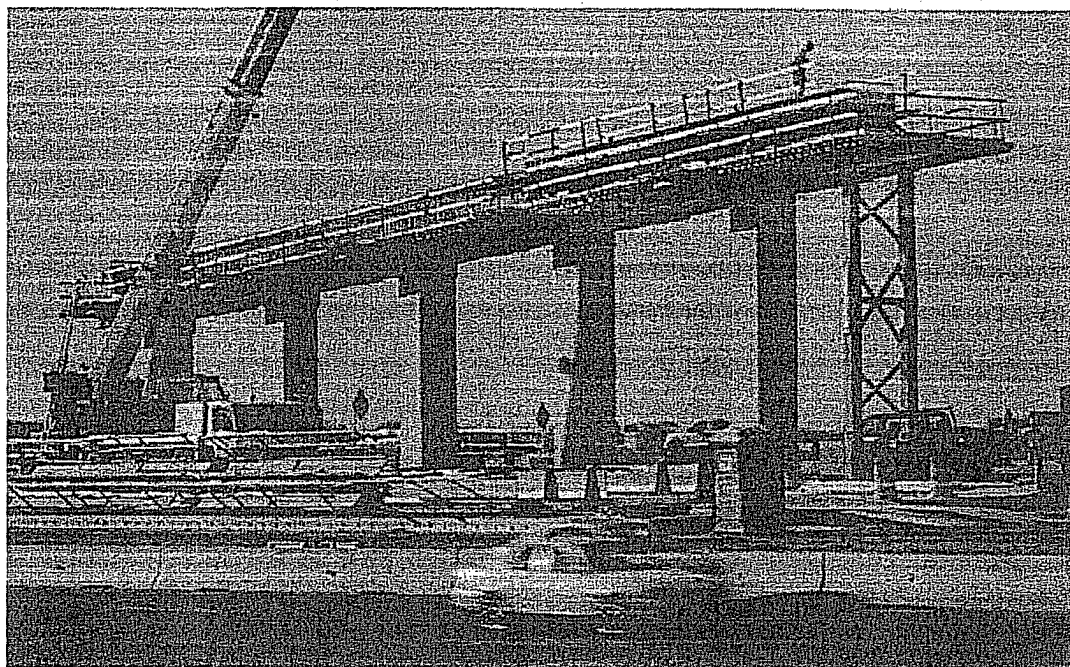
Hmmm. Our editorial praised Dewhurst's "courage," saying he "went out on a political limb" with a pledge to find more money to improve roads and bridges. It was too much of a limb, apparently.

We also said the following about Senate candidate Dewhurst, referencing his inaugural address:

Parts of Dewhurst's inaugural address sounded like a politician's anti-Washington stump speech. We heard the substantive parts, too, the parts that identified problems where there are no easy solutions. That's what leadership is about -- getting people to do the right things, not just the easy things.

I don't speak for the editorial board, but I'm betting we'd be taking back all of the above.

## Editorial: Where's the congestion relief out of Texas Legislature?



Staff photo

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Published 22 March 2011 05:23 PM

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Texas lawmakers are tackling the problem of transportation underfunding with the ferocity of bunny rabbits.

The bill-filing deadline has passed for this year's lawmaking session, but there have been no bold, promising moves to bulk up the state's highway fund. It appears that TxDOT revenue will actually drop in the next two-year budget cycle.

Most of the Legislature's revenue-generating ideas nibble around the edges or try to solve the problem over the long haul. Meanwhile, the state has been adding 1,000 people a day, while falling further behind a responsible schedule to add needed roadway capacity.

To make the most of a limp effort in Austin, lawmakers need to rally around those bills that would help the transportation picture, even if the impact is unspectacular.

Unfortunately, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst will not lead the charge. He has gone back on a promise he made in January to produce more money to relieve high-congestion corridors. Dewhurst issued a prepared statement to this newspaper Tuesday saying, "Now is not the time to increase taxes and fees."

If not now, when? As we have stated before, a boost in the motor-fuels tax is overdue. It hasn't been raised in 20 years, and today's fuel-efficient cars are producing less tax money.

One piece of legislation, HJR 15, would address that by bumping up the gas tax 2 cents a year for 10 years, then pegging it to a cost-of-living index and putting all the money in the highway fund. The measure is given little chance of passage in the tax-averse House, where lawmakers are struggling to bridge a huge budget gap in the general fund.

A bill that might have a chance, HB 2917, would give county commissioners authority to double the optional local levy on vehicle registration, from \$10 to \$20, for transportation. That should appeal to lawmakers' comfort with local control, as opposed to new mandates from Austin. (It's the same argument we made last session for the unsuccessful bill to let local voters decide new transportation taxes.)

Another bill that deserves support, HB 563, would give cities and counties better tools to capture higher tax values on property around new transportation projects. Those could include road as well as rail projects and could be critical to developing the Cotton Belt commuter rail line across the north part of the metro area. The North Texas delegation should get behind this measure.

Local lawmakers also need to push through bills to allow public-private partnerships to rebuild, expand and partially toll SH 183 across Irving (HB 2186, SB 1145) and Interstate 35E from LBJ Freeway into Denton (HB 2985, SB 1144). In the absence of new tax money, this metro area simply must have ways to unclog impossibly jammed roadways.

Lawmakers appear unmoved by TxDOT's forecast that new highway projects can't go forward starting next year because of crimped funding. Texas was the national sensation in population growth in newly released census figures. It's sad that leaders aren't bullish on creating a transportation network to match.

### **Support these bills**

HB 2917 — Would allow county commissioners to double the local option levy on vehicle registration, from \$10 to \$20, for transportation.

HB 563 — Would give local government new tools to capture property taxes generated by new transportation projects. Could be used for road or rail.

HB 3793, HJR 75 — Two of several measures to phase out the practice of diverting highway fund money for other purposes, including policing state roadways.

HB 2186, SB 1145 — Would authorize a public-private partnership to rebuild, expand and partially toll SH 183 across Irving.

HB 2985, SB 1144 — Would authorize a public-private partnership to rebuild, expand and partially toll I-35E from I-635 to Denton.