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NEWS > STATE Wednesday, Apr 29, 2009

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Bill would provide billions for North Texas roads and rail

BY DAVE MONTGOMERY

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AUSTIN -- Addressing one of Tarrant County's top legislative issues, the state Senate on Wednesday voted 23-8 to give preliminary approval to legislation designed to provide billions of dollars for North Texas road and rail improvements.

The measure would allow countywide elections in which voters would decide what fees and taxes they want to pay for road and rail improvements. The measure was originally intended for 12 North Texas counties but has been broadened to include the San Antonio, El Paso and Austin areas.

Amendments added Wednesday further expanded the bill's reach to McLennan, Coryell, Cameron and Nueces counties.

Gov. Rick Perry, who supported the original concept, has voiced reservations about proposed fee increases and the inclusion of other areas of the state.

State Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, the bill's sponsor, and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the Senate's presiding officer, went to the governor's office just before the start of debate but declined to talk about the meeting.

"It's not a perfect solution, but it's the best solution we can put together," Carona, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, told senators.

The measure is not a tax bill, as some opponents have depicted it, but instead would give local voters the

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option to finance much-needed transportation improvements that the state is unable to finance.

North Texas political leaders including Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief and Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck have pushed the bill as a top initiative in the 2009 Legislature, saying it is vitally needed to help rescue the Metroplex from worsening congestion and pollution.

The regional supporters hope to use a large share of the revenue to finance the construction of more than 200 miles or regional commuter lines. The proposed funding sources include gasoline taxes and added fees on public parking, vehicle emissions, drivers licenses and vehicle registrations. Also included is "an impact fee" on new Texas residents.

But state Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, calling the bill a "muddled mess," said the measure would impose billions of dollars in new taxes.

"I didn't come to Austin to be in the Senate to raise taxes over and over again," Patrick said.

State Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he believes the bill runs afoul of the Texas Constitution on at least two counts -- as a "special bill" that doesn't meet the requirements of the constitution and, because it includes provisions for taxes and fees, violates a constitutional requirement that tax bills originate in the House.

"I do not believe the bill is constitutional," Ogden said.

At Carona's request, senators delayed a final vote until Tuesday to allow more time to study Ogden's point of order, although Carona acknowledged that the postponement puts him at a disadvantage by giving opponents more time "to turn up the heat" on the bill.

Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, a watchdog organization that has aggressively attacked the bill, urged its supporters to put pressure on senators in advance of the debate. Other conservative groups, including grassroots Republicans in Tarrant County, have also denounced the measure because of its proposed tax and fee increases.

One feature that seemingly picked up wavering urban lawmakers was a "low-income relief" component that would allow county commissioners courts to exempt low- and moderate-income residents with "significant financial hardship" from several fees. The exemption would not apply to the fuel tax or parking fee.

Transportation bill

HB9 by Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, and SB855 by Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas.

Would allow designated counties to hold elections in which voters would decide on proposed fees and taxes to fund road and rail projects. It applies specifically to counties in North Texas and two Central Texas counties: Travis (Austin) and Bexar (San Antonio). El Paso and Houston are also interested in being included. Voters would choose from a menu of six taxes or fees.

How to track: Go to www.legis.state.tx.us and search for the bills by its number (HB9, SB855).

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citizen wrote on 4/8/2009 11:01:35 PM:

Most of us certainly don't want to pay more fees and taxes, but I have yet to hear any of the groups opposed to the bill provide a solution to the ever increasing congestion on roadways. How do we pay for the needed roads/rail without funding?

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WASP wrote on 4/8/2009 9:41:57 PM:

No new taxes! I'll vote any House or Senate representative out of office who sponsors or supports this sneaky tax. Worthless rich bums....

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