

Editorial: Solutions to traffic woes are scarce

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As if we need reminders that traffic around here is a drag.

The Texas highway system has slipped several notches in new state rankings from the free-market Reason Foundation. Rated for performance and efficiency, Texas has fallen from eighth in the nation to 17th.

The reason: urban congestion. Texas' metro highways now rank as the 11th most congested in the nation, according to the Reason analysis.

That's bad for business, bad for the air, bad for the quality of life.

At least the bad news helps remind state leaders of their negligence in protecting urban economies from the corrosive effects of impossible traffic.

Too little state money has been flowing to metro areas to complete and improve regional highway grids, and top leaders are generally bankrupt of bold, definitive ideas to reverse the trend.

That leaves North Texas with few options to building a massive system of tolled and partially tolled highways.

Just how massive may come as a shock to drivers whose monthly TollTag charges rival their utility bills:

- Today, North Texas has 520 miles of tolled lanes.
- In 2030, the region is expected to have 3,379 miles of tolled lanes.

Those include hybrid projects like the massive LBJ rebuild, which will provide free lanes as well as toll lanes for drivers willing to pay for guaranteed speed. That's a useful traffic-management tool, even if people with toll fatigue won't see it that way.

It's hard to get state lawmakers to admit it, but the widening web of tollways is preordained by their refusal to boost the main source of state road revenue: the motor fuels tax.

That tax was last raised, to 20 cents a gallon, in 1991. Since then, inflation has eroded the buying power to about 13 cents.

The Senate transportation chairman, Sen. [John Carona](#) of Dallas, has the guts to call for an increase of 10 cents a gallon. But few others have been interested in discussing that obvious step, preferring to focus on new borrowing programs.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst is reviving talk of financing projects by borrowing against additional sales taxes that would be generated along a new roadway. He also wants to analyze whether money now dedicated to rural roads should be shifted to fighting urban congestion.

Both ideas deserve careful consideration by lawmakers, but we doubt they would bring enough money to avert a predicted cutoff of new state highway projects come 2012.

Neither do we see funding initiatives among transportation ideas announced yesterday by Sen. [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#) in her run for governor. She said she is skeptical about the need for new money and wants to concentrate on an audit of TxDOT. Gov. [Rick Perry](#) has made it clear that he thinks roadways are underfunded, but he has stopped short of calling for specific new sources of money.

If state leaders are unwilling to own the problem and point the way to a solution, they may someday have to deal with a threat that Carona pointed out in the Reason study: Mississippi is gaining on us.