

Conference kicks off with talk of money: TxDOT needs more, director says



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AUSTIN -- Texas roads and bridges need more money --

many billions more -- if the Texas Department of Transportation is going to be able to adequately maintain the ones it has now and build the new ones the state's growing population will need, the agency's executive director said Thursday.

Amadeo Saenz welcomed hundreds of engineers, architects, planners, and government officials from across Texas and the U.S. to the fifth annual Texas Transportation Forum Thursday with a speech that focused on the future, but said no amount of technological innovations or other improvements will be enough if Texas can't find more money to spend on roads.

"The financial challenges we're facing in transportation don't mean congestion will get a little worse. Or roads will get a little rougher. Or projects will take a little longer," he said. Instead, the gap between needs and expected funding is huge, and so will be the impact on Texas drivers, he said.

How to pay for Texas' sprawling highways and bridges, and keep up with traffic in fast-growing cities like Dallas, has emerged as a key issue in the 2010 governor's race.

Gov. Rick Perry has not called for a tax increase, but has insisted that Texas needs more money for transportation -- from tolls, from more federal dollars and by steering more of the existing state revenues to transportation.

On Wednesday, he **proposed amending the Texas Constitution** to require a two-thirds

majority in the Legislature before any tax increase could become law, a step that could make it more difficult for lawmakers to raise revenue for transportation.

His challenger, Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, said **last week during a stop in Dallas** that she's not convinced the department needs more money. Instead, she said she would appoint a panel to study the department and its needs before supporting a tax increase, something many road-building advocates are calling for.

Saenz didn't reference the campaign, but stressed that a panel of experts appointed by the Texas Transportation Commission has already determined that Texas **will need \$332 billion** moreover the next 20 years than current revenues will provide. If it doesn't find the money, commutes in Texas' biggest cities will grow longer as an ever-growing share of the department's revenues goes to maintain its roads. Among the members of the panel was former transportation commission chairman **David Laney**, who introduced Hutchison in Dallas last week.

"Gas-tax revenues are already down," Saenz said, noting that total gas tax receipts were 2 percent less than the department predicted in fiscal year 2009. And in the first three months of the new fiscal year, receipts are down again, even after the department adjusted for slower growth. That trend could continue, even if the economy fully recovers, as vehicles begin to burn less gasoline and as more Texans look for ways to shorten their commutes.

"If we continue to pay for our roads and bridges using mostly vehicle registration fees and gasoline taxes, we're not even going to come close," he said. "No one has offered to write us a (\$332 billion) check and I noticed there were no collection buckets at the doors when you came in," Saenz said. But he said the department must work with lawmakers and citizens to develop new ways to raise funds, or the department will run out of money for new projects.

Saenz noted that the department is busy for now on projects paid for by \$2.8 billion Texas received in highway-related federal stimulus funds last year, and in spending another \$2 billion or so in proceeds from bonds approved by Texas voters in 2007. But those funds are running out fast, and if the Legislature doesn't find new money in 2011, most new major highway projects will stop by 2012.