



Bill would allow local-option fees for roads

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By JAY ROOT / Associated Press

Voters in at least 19 Texas counties could impose taxes on themselves to build road, bridge and rail projects under a bill approved Wednesday by the state Senate.

The proposal, which could not take effect until statewide voters sign off on it, would allow county gasoline taxes and other assorted fees on parking, drivers' licenses and vehicle registrations. It also would allow for a "Texas new resident roadway impact fee" of up to \$250 on vehicles that were previously registered out of state.

The bill is still a long way from final passage. It faces another Senate vote, probably Tuesday, and an uncertain fate in the Texas House.

The vote was 23-8, according to an official Senate tally sheet.

All the money-raising proposals and the transportation projects would have to be approved by local voters. Harris County, where Houston is located, is exempted from the bill, which sparked heated discussions in the Senate Wednesday night.

Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, railed against the legislation even though his home county is currently not included in it. He said local authorities are already pressuring the Legislature to add the region.

"They want the opportunity to tax their citizens," Patrick said. "We're creating a mechanism for a tax." After more than a dozen amendments were adopted, carving out various exceptions and adding several counties, Patrick called the bill a "muddled mess."

The sponsor of the legislation, Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, who favors increasing the gasoline tax, said he would rather finance the growing backlog of transportation projects with a statewide approach. But, given political opposition to that idea, including from Republican Gov. Rick Perry, he said letting locals fund their own projects was better than nothing.

"If we don't go for this we're not going to get anything," Carona said.

Meanwhile, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, said the proposal contained too many fees and tax hikes and not enough safeguards against waste and fraud.

"As we initially feared when the bill was filed, what was originally presented as a tax bill for a single region now encompasses most of the state's population centers," said Justin Keener, a spokesman for the group. "This is a tax increase package with statewide implications, and all Texans need to read up on this bill over the weekend now that the Senate has opened it so broadly."

There were at least 19 counties included in the bill. It would apply to the entire Dallas-Fort Worth region, a 12-county area encompassing Collin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Hood, Hunt, Johnson, Kaufman, Parker, Rockwell, Tarrant and Wise counties.

It would also include Travis, El Paso, McLennan, Coryell, Cameron and Nueces counties. Bexar County, where San Antonio is located, would be included in the legislation but could only raise gasoline taxes to pay for projects.

After the Senate adopted an amendment by Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport and Love Field got exempted in the bill from coughing up any of their parking fee money to transportation projects.

The local-option proposal would not take effect until Texas voters approve a separate measure, amending the Texas Constitution, designed to stop budgetary diversions of revenue from the gas tax and vehicle registration fees to pay for projects not related to transportation.

Some of the funding in the bill, destined for mass transit proposals, is also contingent upon passage of a constitutional amendment that allows motor fuels tax dollars to be spent on rail projects.

The 20-cent tax on gasoline, which hasn't been raised in Texas since 1991, could eventually rise to 30 cents in counties where voters adopt the local-option increases under the legislation. Voters in the counties that fall under the bill could raise vehicle registration fees by \$60, and tack on up to \$15 in local-option vehicle inspection fees.

Carona, the bill sponsor, said opponents would use "every tool at their disposal to kill this legislation."

"They are obviously impacted by the various anti-tax groups that have been so vocal across the state and I suspect they fear their re-election prospects," Carona said. "This is the only practical solution for the Legislature this session."