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Editorial: Rails and roads

Finally, the legislative train is rolling in Austin toward allowing local voters to decide on new ways to fund new road and rail projects. As with any proposal at this early stage of the legislative session, there are questions about exactly where this one is heading and how it is going to get there, but at least it is moving.

Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, has filed Senate Bill 855, which would allow county commissioners to call elections on local transportation funding plans. The idea was kicked around during the last two legislative sessions based on using sales taxes for the projects, but it has gone nowhere.

This time, sales taxes have been eliminated in favor of a menu of funding options, from a new county tax on motor fuels limited to 10 cents a gallon, to an annual "motor vehicle emissions fee" not to exceed \$15, to a "new resident roadway impact fee" of up to \$250.

That there are problems with the bill as filed is evident from the fact that Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, who is to lead the effort in the House, has not yet filed a companion bill. Truitt has said that her bill is not ready, although she joined Carona and a gaggle of other local legislators and officials at a news conference Monday announcing and supporting the plan.

Truitt said one funding option in Carona's bill needs to be changed. That's a "parking regulation and management fee in the amount of \$1 per hour vehicle use of a parking space."

"We're not going to charge people a dollar more per hour to park at Six Flags," she said. In fact, she said, there is no clear concept yet about where the parking fee might apply.

It's worth acknowledging other drawbacks about the bill — after all, the failure of proposals in the two previous sessions means it's a tough concept to get across.

For one, proponents are putting municipal officials on the spot to help pony up more than \$250,000 in lobbying fees. That means that city councils will have to decide soon whether to support a concept that, at best, wouldn't be put before voters for a couple of years. That's a political risk some may not be willing to take.

And it's not yet certain whether top state officials are on board. Gov. Rick Perry's deputy chief of staff, Kris Heckman, told the *Austin American-Statesman* that Perry initially had encouraged Carona's effort based on a belief that it would be targeted to Dallas-Fort Worth.

But the bill Carona filed would apply elsewhere, something that Heckman was quoted as saying would require "a lot more scrutiny."

This is an idea whose time has most definitely come.

The Texas population is skyrocketing, partly because Perry and other officials have fought to keep the state's job market strong. But Texans are wasting too much time stuck in traffic, and the problem is growing worse.

More transportation funding options are essential, both for roads and for rail transit in congested urban areas. Carona's bill probably will change as it makes its way through the Legislature, but its underlying concept is sound.