

Official: Gridlock, growth overwhelming Texas highways

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AUSTIN - Bond issues, public-private partnerships and overwhelming voter support last November for using \$1.7 billion from the state's Rainy Day Fund to help build and maintain state roadways aren't enough to unclog Texas highways, Department of Transportation Chairman Ted Houghton said Thursday.

"Bottom line, future Texans will have to live with greater congestion and that could affect safety on our roads," Houghton said at the annual Texas Transportation Forum. "Texas has a vast, impressive transportation system. We've got bragging rights to be sure. But not everything is rosy."

He described the state's 192,000 miles of highway lanes – the most in the nation – 52,000 bridges and 2,000 aviation facilities as the "backbone" of the Texas economy. Then he nodded to the east toward gridlocked Interstate 35 a few blocks away in downtown Austin and said as long as those kinds of situations remained, there was "much work to be done."

"We're sitting here demographically and geographically in the center of the country," he said. "The capacity of our system has not kept pace."

He also warned that if the population continues to grow as expected, then the 26 million Texas residents already here "are going to have a lot more company in a very short period of time."

Gas tax revenue at the state and federal levels have remained the same since the early 1990s, said Houghton, who avoided specifically calling for an increase except to say the future of the state "will require new thinking, planning and new funding." Currently, the Texas gas tax is 20 cents a gallon.

He also did not address the impact of falling energy prices but repeated an agency theme – Texas needs \$5 billion annually for its transportation system, including \$1 billion for maintenance and another \$1 billion to accommodate areas of the state where the energy boom has resulted in heavier road use.

John Barton, deputy executive director of the transportation agency, said money was "the obvious challenge." The future of transportation is dependent on "getting that \$5 billion down to zero or at least as close to zero as we can," he said.

He said the \$1.7 billion already had been deposited in the state highway fund and hoped projects from that money would be underway by the end of this year.

"I promise to you we will not disappoint," he said. "That's important to all of us."