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## State must act for regional mobility progress

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Texas is growing at an exponential rate. Nowhere is this more evident than in north Fort Worth, where Texas prairieland has been replaced with robust commercial development and a sea of rooftops. According to the latest U.S. Census numbers, Fort Worth is now the fastest-growing large city in the nation, growing by more than 38 percent during the past decade.

This is good news, because this kind of commercial and residential growth has been the lifeblood of the Texas economy, which has helped us weather the economic storm far better than other states and communities around the country.

However, as a result of this growth, we find ourselves at a breaking point: near-constant gridlock throughout the region threatens to slam the breaks on our forward momentum. The delivery of goods and services, through our advanced, regional multi-modal system, is compromised daily. Families struggle to get to work on time, or pick up their kids from school on time. Customers will avoid businesses that they are unable to reach due to congestion, which results in a loss of revenue for the businesses and the tax base.

Within our community, this congestion is wasting precious fuel, damaging our air quality and jeopardizing future economic development.

Today, we find ourselves at a crossroads. During the last session, our Legislature demonstrated great leadership in extending limited comprehensive development agreement (CDA) authority, allowing several legacy transportation projects to advance years or decades ahead of schedule.

These CDA agreements have manifested themselves in public-private partnerships, like the North Tarrant Express, which allow transportation projects to be built that would otherwise never come off the drawing board.

While there is much confusion as to how they work, the process is actually very simple. Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) bids out the design, construction, operation and maintenance of roadways to a private company (or consortium of companies) that invests its own private equity capital (along with low interest loans) to fund the transportation project, in exchange for the receipt of toll revenues on certain lanes of the project, over an extended period of time. This allows critical transportation corridors to be completed decades before they could – if ever – be funded by the state.

And, because some of us are unwilling to pay tolls every time we drive, a good portion of these public-private partnership projects are developed as managed lane systems (which includes the North Tarrant Express). Managed lanes allow drivers the choice, during heavy congestion, of traveling on existing general purpose lanes (non-toll) or on toll-managed lanes that will guarantee a faster rate of speed and offer safer, more reliable travel. Also, in many cases over time, the projects expand the number of existing general purpose lanes, helping to increase capacity and reduce congestion over the long-term. In short, managed lanes are not toll roads in the traditional sense, but are hybrids that give commuters a choice.

While the Legislature was wise to extend CDA authority during the last legislative session, the authority is set to expire in August of this year. This means that projects already under construction (like additional segments of the North Tarrant Express) face the real possibility of not being completed under the current agreement, unless additional legislation is passed during the current session. It is vital that our legislators extend limited CDA authority, so that we can complete the North Tarrant Express project, expanding Interstate-35W from downtown Fort Worth through the AllianceTexas region. This section of I-35W serves Fort Worth's fastest growing area, which, alone, represents hundreds of companies and tens of thousands of jobs. We simply must complete this project.

With this legislative session under way, now is the time to contact your state representatives and urge them to extend limited CDA authority for the North Tarrant Express project and other critical projects throughout the North Texas region. Otherwise, we face the prospect of taking this and other critical transportation projects off the table and postponing them indefinitely. This cannot be an option. We cannot afford – as a region, or a state – to hinder growth by not investing in our transportation infrastructure. The cost is too high to bear; our economic future is on the line.

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