

Tuesday, September 2, 2014

## EDITORIALS

# We Recommend

## Vote yes on state's Proposition 1

**T**exas voters have only one statewide ballot proposition to decide in November, and this one's an easy call.

Proposition 1 would yield billions for Texas roadways without raising taxes a penny. The proposal would tap the spiking tax collections on oil and gas production and use a portion for highways. It wouldn't solve the road-funding problem, but it would put a dent in it.

Voters can support this constitutional amendment with no qualms.

Context is important for how cash-starved the state has become for road money. Texas is growing by 1,000 people a day, yet the 20-cent gasoline tax has not been raised since 1991. As that tax loses buying power, today's more efficient cars and trucks consume less fuel to support the roads they use.

At the same time, lawmakers in the Republican-controlled Legislature have refused to raise taxes or fees for highways, but they did hatch a series of multibillion-dollar borrowing schemes to keep money flowing. The main credit lines are now maxed out, and the state faces a payback of more than \$30 billion. Annual payments are \$1.2 billion a year.

That was the picture lawmakers faced last year when they asked TxDOT for a figure on the funding shortfall. The reply: The department needs \$4 billion more a year for minimal growth and maintenance, plus another \$1 bil-

lion for deteriorating roads in the Oil Patch.

Prop 1 is what lawmakers came up with to help bridge that gap. It would take half the energy-production taxes that would otherwise flow to the state's rainy day fund and deposit the sum in the highway fund. That would produce an estimated \$1.7 billion for roads next fiscal year. The money would be restricted to nontoll projects.

Top lawmakers from both parties have been satisfied that the rainy day fund would continue to run record balances. If the fiscal picture changes, a special panel of lawmakers could lower the share that goes to roads and boost the balance in the rainy day fund.

How far does \$1.7 billion go for roads? Not very, when spread across the state. Not when looking at the cost of a mega-project, like the nearly \$5 billion expansion of I-35E from I-635 to Denton. And not when considering that North Texas alone has multiple major projects in the pipeline.

Still, when lawmakers go back to the drawing board on road funding next year, the problem would be more manageable if voters put the bounty of oil and gas taxes to good use.

Texas will still need a steady, longer-range funding mechanism to meet the demands of a booming population. That's a question for another day. The question Nov. 4 will be yes or no on Prop 1. The common-sense answer is yes.