

TURF Testimony

Joint Hearing on Transportation Finance

February 1, 2010

Terri Hall is the Founder/Director of Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom (TURF). TURF is a non-partisan, grassroots organization of 100,000 members across Texas defending citizens concerns with toll road policy, the Trans Texas Corridor, and eminent domain abuse. TURF promotes non-toll transportation solutions.

Texas transportation policy is gridlocked. Little progress is being made to solve congestion and mobility issues, and the money we do have is being squandered on mismanagement, misplaced priorities, and just plain waste. We can't know if TxDOT is really out of money unless an independent firm conducts a top to bottom audit. We have ever-changing figures on whether the funding gap is \$56 billion, \$86 billion, or TxDOT's latest figure of over \$300 billion. No one believes TxDOT anymore. We know they manipulate data to suit their toll agenda.

What we the taxpayers CANNOT allow is a gas tax hike, in addition to the continuation of toll proliferation. What we observe happening is a push for a gas tax increase in order to have more money to borrow against for yet more toll roads. We've already seen what TxDOT does with an infusion of new money...Prop 14, Prop 12, Texas Mobility Funds, stimulus money...the vast majority of all of those funds went to toll roads, not free roads. In fact, \$1 billion in gas taxes is subsidizing just two toll projects in North Texas. Now the NTTA wants to pledge the state's credit for two more toll projects which risks up to \$8 BILLION worth of our gas taxes because of this toll road madness. That's the equivalent of TxDOT's budget for an ENTIRE YEAR! This is reckless and out of control fiscal policy. We DO NOT have the money for these toll roads!

What we keep hearing is "we have to leave all options on the table" and "we need all the tools available." The only tool currently being used is toll roads, not freeways. When people say they want all the tools left in the tool box...translated that means: we want every taxing method ever contemplated on things that move to exploit the taxpayers and dig deeper into motorists pockets to feed our greed, waste, and toll road bureaucracy.

No deal. We either have a predominantly gas tax funded system or a toll funded system, not both. Even a casual observer can see that a toll-funded system is unsustainable, buries us in too much speculative, leveraged debt, in-debts future generations, explodes the cost of transportation knocking drivers off highways clogging neighborhood streets, and results in un-collectible tolls and underutilized roads that don't ultimately solve congestion.

We have no business building a SINGLE toll road that can't pay for itself.

A 2008 Lyceum poll showed only 8% of Texas drivers even use toll roads on a regular basis. Why are we spending BILLIONS in unsustainable debt to solve congestion for only 8% of the traffic? Toll roads are speculative, risky, and rely on cheap oil and rosy traffic forecasts that often do not show up. This is true in toll-heavy Florida and in Texas on the Camino Columbia toll road, SH 130, and with many NTTA projects (had to raise rates 32%). We submit to you that toll roads DO NOT solve congestion; they just displace that traffic to surrounding streets and merely manipulate congestion for profit.

CLEAN HOUSE AT TxDOT

Despite an attempt at reforming TxDOT in the last round of the sunset process, toll entities and TxDOT are still running amok...nothing has changed. In fact, it's only gotten worse with the latest NTTA bailout, TxDOT continuing to lobby for free reign with tolling and PPPs, its insistence on usurping the will the Texans and the Legislature to continue to seek private partners using backdoor CDAs called pass through toll financing, as well as its attempts at multi-leveraging debt despite the Legislature's strong action to prevent such. Stop the relentless waste, fraud, and abuse at TxDOT. Close down the GPA division, stop them from funneling money over to maintenance to starve new construction, end best value bidding (which means they no longer use lowest bid), install an Inspector General, scrap the appointed commission, and conduct an immediate top to bottom audit. Implementing these reforms would go a LONG way in restoring trust and confidence in how our transportation dollars are being used.

State needs to properly fund STATE highway system

What's happened particularly on Perry's watch, is that the State has shifted the burden for building and maintaining state highways to local government. We did a comparison. In 1980, TxDOT was 15% of the State's budget, now it's only 9%. Like school finance, the majority of the burden for public education now falls to local government through escalating local property tax, rather than with the State. Why on earth would local governments be lobbying for a local option gas tax when it's the State's job to build STATE highways? They ought to be INSISTING the State fulfill its duty to properly fund and maintain STATE highways. Local government has its own local roads to worry about and shouldn't have to take the heat for the State abdicating its responsibility.

Formula Funding

Need to end this pitting of region against region and creating city-states without proper consideration for affordability and statewide connectivity. We can do it with fair formula funding. Stop requiring local government to come begging to the Commission for a piece of what they're already owed.

NO NEW TAXES UNTIL...

You see, herein lies the rub. We will NEVER allow more money to go to this corrupt, tone-deaf, arrogant agency until:

- Clean house and completely restructure TxDOT, get rid of the most arrogant state agency in Texas and start over.

Congress. Politicians tried to shove nationalized healthcare down people's throats despite the overwhelming public opposition, and look what it got them. The Democrats lost the majority in the U.S. Senate. Stop the blame game, finger pointing, and excuses like: "the Governor won't allow a gas tax hike," and start implementing the will of the people, and if necessary override the Governor! You know it's coming, put a plan in place to overcome it or risk the wrath of the taxpayers.

We will continue to use EVERY means available to us to stop every unwanted or fiscally imprudent/exploitive toll road in this state - including litigation, killing legislation, boycotts of toll roads, and ultimately issuing pick slips to tone-deaf politicians until our voices are heard and heeded and we return to a sustainable, sensible, and most affordable transportation policy.