Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks at the Texas Transportation Summit

Thursday, July 19, 2007

Thank you, Anita. You know, my frustration with the old way of building highways was crystallized back in the mid-90’s when Anita commuted a couple times a week to the Waco area for her job. I got real interested in her safety as she spent time on one of the busiest and most dangerous stretches of road, I-35 in Central Texas. I am honored to be here with the men and women whose business is building a better Texas, one mile at a time. I especially want to thank TxDOT, the Associated General Contractors, the Transportation Institute and Texas Good Roads Transportation Association for giving us a chance to celebrate the successes of the recent past and share our optimistic view of the future.

As Anita might tell you, I can be your typical male when driving, especially when it comes to asking for directions. Of course, she hasn't had to worry about that for the past seven years, thanks to the good people at DPS. I will tell you that, when I was driving, I was never lost. I just took some creative routes every once in a while. But I didn't want to pull over because I might ask some old timer for directions and he'd give me the classic response, “you can't get there from here.” Chances are, the visionaries in this room have heard that phrase more than you'd like when you've been willing to dream big about the future of Texas transportation. When you've offered your ideas on building more, better roads, you've been told time and time again, “You can't get there from here.” But in Texas, that mindset is history. “There” is a Texas with transportation resources that are rapidly built, safe and efficient, and a source of additional revenue for additional projects. I assure you that we can get there from here and we can do it together.

Think of how far we have already come. On the upside, we've been blessed with a rapidly-increasing population, a growing economy and increasing trans-continental trade. However, we were also burdened with aging roads, choked by increasing traffic and handcuffed by traditional approaches to funding. In a state that needs billions of dollars in new roads for both urban centers and rural areas, we were limited to a mere trickle of dollars returning from the federal government, limited general revenue dollars, and a gas tax that few legislators would even think of raising in a time of record high fuel prices. Take away the billion-plus transportation dollars the legislature directs elsewhere each year and it’s tough to maintain our state’s forward momentum. Heck, that’s not even enough money to maintain the current system anymore, let alone build new highways.

I think Chairman Williamson framed the issue exactly as it is today. Our three choices are toll roads, slow roads or no roads. We can't rely on Washington to rescue us when we have the second worst rate of return in the nation on our gas tax remittances. Raising the gas tax is a bad idea for several reasons, first because we are moving towards greater fuel efficiency in vehicles, secondly because one-fourth of the money is diverted off the top, and third because
it is an indiscriminate tax that burdens rural drivers the same as urban drivers even though they get less benefit in terms of new and improved roads. If we do not build roads through innovative financing tools, roads will not get built.

My administration is not now, nor has it ever been, inclined to conduct business as usual. Like you, we want what’s best for Texas. We understand that roads are the circulatory system of our state. We believe that our overall health is contingent on the free, unobstructed flow of commuters, freight and tourists. When those arteries clog up and can no longer handle the flow, trouble is on the horizon. However, our antiquated system of funding was the medical equivalent of using leeches and spells to stave off a fatal heart attack. It may have worked years ago, many, many years ago, but there is a better way. So we worked to bring the private sector into the equation and the results have been remarkable. Engaging the private sector introduced a value into the equation that was heretofore unheard of: competition.

We Texans love competition under the Friday Night Lights, but it has long been a foreign concept to our government. We all know that competition brings out the best in athletes and it has brought out the best in our efforts at improving our infrastructure. We have gone from squeezing blood from the turnip of an antiquated funding system to the prospect of reaping billions of dollars up front from private companies competing for toll road business. Projects that local toll authorities would not bid on just a few years ago are now attracting their high interest, their very strong interest, because private companies are competing to build those projects. The recent changes offered by the legislature do nothing to stop the most vital projects in the fastest growing regions of the state. In fact, under Senate Bill 792 tens of billions of dollars in planned construction will move forward. I believe this legislation, in its final form, affirmed what we said all along: local communities need new tools to get local projects built. And, ladies and gentleman, they may never say it, but this legislature admitted that we are on the right track with our transportation policy in this state. While they were calling for a moratorium on toll roads with one hand, they were exempting the toll projects in their own districts with the other hand, because their constituents want roads built back home.

Rest assured that I stand firm in my commitment to the importance of local control. In government, we bear responsibility for statewide policy, but I’m the last guy to say that Austin has all the answers. We want to clear the way for local government so they can provide innovative solutions based on local needs and reap the benefits of that innovation. Does this take TxDOT out of the equation? Not at all. Not every city and town needs to reach beyond traditional funding methods, nor is every one staffed for private sector relationships. This vital agency will continue to oversee statewide approaches and engage at the local level to meet transportation needs.

As in so many other areas, Texas is a leader in these approaches. Other states have carefully watched as we’ve pushed for these reforms and are now leaping into the game after seeing the private sector response. The select group of companies that can take on road projects of this scope are now drawing interest from multiple other states. Will we press forward in our commitment to these public-private partnerships? I certainly believe we should. If we can partner with the private sector to help us address the drop-out problem in our schools, if we are willing to bring the private sector to the table when disaster strikes, if we are working hard to encourage investment in our state from companies like Toyota and Nokia, then I think we should engage the private sector to help us alleviate road congestion, to strengthen our economy, and keep Texans moving. These partnerships will allow us to do more than just get from here to there more quickly. They will ensure that Texas remains the number one exporting state in America, the strongest business climate in the country, the greatest place to work, build a life and raise a family. So, unlike that old timer on the side of the road, I do believe that, working together, we can get there from here. Thank you, and may God bless you.