

- SUBJECT:** Expanding the Freeport heavy-lift corridor
- COMMITTEE:** Transportation — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 7 ayes — Pickett, Martinez, Y. Davis, Fletcher, Murr, Paddie, Simmons
- 0 nays
- 5 absent — Burkett, Harless, Israel, McClendon, Phillips
- WITNESSES:** For — Michael Wilson, Port Freeport; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Christina Wisdom, Shintech, Inc.; Michael Garcia, Texas Association of Manufacturers; Daniel Womack, the Dow Chemical Company)
- Against — None
- On — (*Registered, but did not testify:* John Barton, James Bass, and Bill Hale, TxDOT)
- BACKGROUND:** HB 1305, enacted by the 82nd Legislature in 2011, established the Freeport heavy-lift corridor, an area of Brazoria County where oversized and overweight vehicles can transport cargo on designated roads from Port Freeport to inland destinations. The routes of this corridor are designated by Transportation Code, sec. 623.219.
- To travel on the designated roads, operators of oversized or overweight vehicles must obtain a permit from the port authority. The permit fees primarily are used to maintain and improve these roads, according to sec. 623.214.
- DIGEST:** HB 1321 would amend Transportation Code, sec. 623.219(b) by expanding the roads on which oversized and overweight vehicles could travel in the Freeport heavy-lift corridor. Oversized and overweight vehicles could use two additional roads in Freeport and four additional roads in Sweeny.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2015.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 1321 would accommodate the industrial growth in Brazoria County by providing more routes for oversized and overweight cargo vehicles. New factories and plants are opening in the Port Freeport area, and the Freeport heavy-lift corridor currently is too small to provide for the new and anticipated development. A new international container port opened in 2014, greatly expanding use of the port. In addition, Port Freeport expects significant new investment in the region's manufacturers in the near future, and the corridor should be expanded to help these businesses thrive.

The bill would help reduce the amount of traffic in the heavy-lift corridor because more roads would be designated for overweight cargo vehicles. According to some estimates, the additional routes provided by the bill would reduce traffic in the area by 20 percent. By diverting industrial trucks to specific roads, HB 1321 would improve public safety because regular traffic could avoid these thoroughfares. Moreover, the heavy-lift corridor likely will be marked with signs. This will improve traffic safety by indicating to overweight vehicle operators the proper routes for their cargo and to the general public that overweight vehicles will be traveling in the area.

Operators of overweight and oversized vehicles pay an additional fee to drive in the heavy-lift corridor. The fee is \$30, and \$26 of the fee goes to highway maintenance. This money offsets any damage that the vehicles may cause to the roads. Furthermore, when the roads in the heavy-lift corridor are upgraded, they will be designed for these overweight trucks. These designs should minimize the amount of road damage these trucks cause.

HB 1321 is only meant to accommodate additional overweight vehicles by expanding the corridor. The maximum weight still would be 125,000 pounds, and it is not expected that oversized or extremely heavy vehicles would use the heavy-lift corridor.

Expanding the heavy-lift corridor would help lower emissions and particulates because many of the cargo vehicles using the corridor otherwise would travel to the Port of Houston to serve the manufacturers in Freeport. HB 1321 would encourage this traffic to stay in the local area by providing additional routes in the corridor, saving costs for shippers and manufacturers, as well as reducing the environmental impact.

Expanding the heavy-lift corridor by 34 miles would help emergency personnel and haz-mat teams anticipate where events like spills and leaks could occur. These events can be difficult to avoid, and HB 1321 would make it easier to predict where hazards may surface by keeping certain overweight vehicles confined to particular roads.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 1321 could have significant health and safety impacts to the Freeport area. Expanding the range and volume of overweight vehicles could expand the potential for harm to residents and the ecosystem of the surrounding area. The existing additional fee for operating oversized and overweight vehicles does not offset the environmental and safety costs associated with activity in the heavy-lift corridor, and this bill would exacerbate these concerns.

While the existing fee does help to defray the costs of road maintenance caused by overweight trucks traveling on roads that are not designed to carry them, these degraded roads still present a safety hazard for the driving public. In addition, increasing the volume of overweight trucks on roads in the Freeport area also could lead to a spike in dangerous interactions with other road users. Increased oil and gas extraction activities in the Eagle Ford area have indicated a connection between a high volume of heavy industrial trucks and an increase in vehicle crashes.

The current fee that supports highway maintenance does nothing to address environmental concerns, including a higher concentration of vehicle emissions that could accompany the presence of more overweight trucks. HB 1321 also could increase the risk of chemical spills and leaks associated with trucks in the corridor carrying harmful chemicals or products in open-top containers.