

Hutchison Moves to Block Toll Plan ***Senate approves provision to delay interstate change***

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WASHINGTON — Texas would be barred from turning existing interstate highways into toll roads by a provision in a major spending bill approved Wednesday by the Senate.

The amendment by Texas Republican Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison would delay for one year a plan by Texas transportation officials to turn to toll roads. State officials have said they need the revenue to help defray an \$86 billion shortfall in highway funding for the state.

Hutchison argued that it is unfair to turn highways already paid for by taxpayers into toll roads, and she has pledged to press for a permanent ban.

Her measure, tied to the one-year, \$104.6 billion transportation and housing spending bill approved by the Senate, would be in effect only for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

"Today we protected Texas taxpayers from paying twice for a highway," Hutchison said.

She also proposed legislation for a permanent ban for all states. A similar bill was offered in the House by Reps. Charlie Gonzales and Ciro Rodriguez, both Democrats from San Antonio, and two House Republicans from Pennsylvania.

Hutchison's opposition places her in direct conflict with Gov. Rick Perry, a fellow Republican whose office she may seek in 2010.

Perry's office noted that state law requires the approval of local elected officials and voters before any existing highway can become a toll road.

"We believe in local control. If the local voters want to toll a local road through their area, then they should have the right to do so," said Perry spokesman Robert Black.

The Texas Department of Transportation was examining the legislation to see what effect it might have on the state, said spokesman Chris Lippincott.

Federal efforts to block toll roads can only worsen a bleak financial picture for the state's highways, Lippincott said. The Texas Transportation Commission is considering shifting \$6 billion from the highway construction budget to maintain the state's roads over the next five years. "Our state is quickly running out of money to build new roads," he said.

Texas faces a triple whammy. It pays more in gas taxes into the federal highway trust fund than it receives back from Washington every year. The state bears heavy highway use because it is the conduit for 80 percent of all NAFTA-related truck traffic. And it is a high-growth state that adds 1,000 new residents a day.

"If our congressional delegation in D.C. wants to be constructive and helpful in addressing state transportation needs, they will work to get more of our gas tax dollars back to Texas," said Black.

Staff writer Polly Ross Hughes in Austin contributed to this report.