

# Star-Telegram

## Lawmakers consider overhaul of vehicle registration fees

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It's not a stretch to say Texans love their pickups. They occupy a place in their hearts just below Mom, football and pecan pie. State law even gives many pickup owners a break on their annual registration fees.

But one of Texas' top transportation officials says that's not fair to drivers as a whole: There are, after all, a fair number of people in the Lone Star State who roll through life behind the wheels of sedans and sports cars.

State Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, wants to overhaul the state's complicated schedule of car registration fees. The result could mean not only a boost in state highway revenue, but also higher annual payments for those stickers that Texans affix to their windshields each year.

"It's crazy. If a brand-new car is \$58 [to register], no matter what kind, and the average pickup is \$54, that's not right. It should be at least \$58," Pickett, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, said during a recent speech in Fort Worth.

During the legislative session this year, lawmakers took steps to make registration fees for most car and pickup owners a flat \$50.75 a year, not including county fees, but delayed implementing the changes until Sept. 1, 2011.

But another legislative session is scheduled before then, and lawmakers say even more changes may be made in the state's cumbersome vehicle-registration laws before that deadline arrives.

Pickett and House and Senate colleagues will soon hold joint hearings on how to solve the state's long-standing transportation funding puzzle, and registration stickers are among several revenue sources being discussed.

The first meeting is scheduled for Feb. 1 in Austin, and Pickett plans to start talking with fellow lawmakers about the merits of increasing vehicle registration fees — he calls it the Registration Simplification Act.

### What we pay

Owners of passenger cars built since model year 2007 pay \$58.80 a year, not including local fees in many counties (\$10 in Tarrant County). But owners of 2004-06 models pay \$50.80, and owners of 2003 and older models pay \$40.80.

For pickups, the registration fee is based on a vehicle's gross weight, and it often works out in the owner's favor.

For example, the owner of a 2008 Ford Ranger short-bed pickup with a gross weight of 4,380 pounds would pay \$44.66. A 2009 Toyota Tacoma with a gross weight of 4,600 pounds would pay \$45.54.

If Texas car and pickup owners all paid the same \$58.80 a year, Pickett said, the state could generate an extra \$380 million to \$500 million.

### Last session

House Bill 2553 changed the registration to \$50.75 for most cars and pickups with a gross weight of 6,000 pounds or less. Vehicles weighing more would pay \$54 to \$840, depending upon their weight class. But lawmakers didn't want the changes to take effect immediately, so the new fees will phase in beginning in 2011.

But interviews this month with several lawmakers indicate that many state officials aren't aware of the new vehicle registration fees. And observers predict more changes as the 2011 legislative session draws near.

"Our vehicle registration fee system is very old, and it's about to be updated," said Tarrant County Tax Assessor-Collector Betsy Price. She added that Texas' fees are consistently among the lowest in the nation.

The annual ritual of paying for a vehicle registration sticker is also emerging as a potential way to raise money for commuter rail in Dallas-Fort Worth.

The idea would be to persuade state legislators to allow a local-option election in North Texas counties, including Tarrant County, asking voters to approve a mobility fee of up to \$60 that would be paid each year at the same time as vehicle registration fees.

While the Texas Constitution prohibits the use of vehicle registration fees for rail, local-option supporters hope to get around that by calling it a mobility fee.

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