

Hutchison releases transportation plan, but not how she would fund it

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BY AMAN BATHEJA

abatheja@star-telegram.com

DALLAS — After months of hammering Gov. Rick Perry's record on transportation, Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison outlined her own plan to keep Texas traffic moving Tuesday.

Hutchison's proposal included vows to reform the Texas Department of Transportation and support toll roads less often than Perry.

But she provided no details on how future transportation improvements would be funded if she becomes governor.

Instead, Hutchison promised to conduct an audit of the Transportation Department and appoint a committee to recommend ways to reduce spending and, if needed, find new revenue. Any new fees or taxes would have to be approved by voters in regional referendums.

"I think it's odd that we've had such a huge increase in spending but very little to show for it," Hutchison said.

If elected, Hutchison's plan would likely kill the hopes of many North Texas leaders that state lawmakers could pass a local option transportation package in the next legislative session in 2011. A group of area elected officials unsuccessfully championed such a measure this year.

Campaign aides confirmed that, if she were to win in November, an audit of the department could not be completed in time for Hutchison to consider any tax increase during the 2011 session.

Hutchison focused most of her remarks at a news conference in Dallas on how the department has lost the trust of Texans and is run by ineffective or possibly incompetent leaders.

"It is time we had managerial and financial expertise in the Texas Department of Transportation," Hutchison said.

She also proposed putting more effort into bringing high-speed rail and commuter rail to Texas, expanding the Texas Transportation Commission from five members to nine and putting a CEO at the head of the commission with background in management and transportation planning.

She also promised to kill the Trans-Texas Corridor plan "once and for all." Perry and the Transportation Department have previously insisted that the unpopular proposal to build a toll road network across the state is already dead, but Hutchison said the project's ideas are still a part of the department's strategies.

Mark Miner, spokesman for Perry's re-election campaign, criticized Hutchison for putting out proposals without details on how she would pay for them. "Spending money you don't have may be the way things are done in Washington, but in Texas we have to live within our means," Miner said. Hutchison said her approach was preferable to a plan to increase the gas tax for Texans without looking in other areas first.

Perry has said he would not rule out an increase in the gas tax to boost transportation funding, though Hutchison didn't do that either Tuesday.

Miner said Hutchison's ideas will increase bureaucracy without improving the situation in Texas. "Creating a new committee and expanding the TxDOT commission will not build one new road in Texas," Miner said.

AMAN BATHEJA, 817-390-7695

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