

2011

SCHEDULE OF
EVENTS

- February-TBA
- March 3rd– 12th
Annual State of
the Counties
Address

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BAYTRAN

Bay Area Houston Transportation Partnership

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 1

JANUARY 2011

Sixth Annual Texas Transportation Forum

The sixth annual Texas Transportation Forum took place on January 3rd in Austin, TX. It was the largest yet, with contractors, state officials and others meeting to talk mobility in the state — and the added challenges they'll face this year to keep Texas moving.

Approximately 1,500 participants were in attendance at the transportation forum luncheon on Tuesday to discuss the challenges. The biggest question? Money — and where Texas can find it to create stable funding for transportation projects.

"You know the gas tax hasn't been raised since 1991 in Texas," said Thomas Bohuslav, a transportation construction consultant who attended the forum. "And the cost has almost doubled to build highways since then. **And so you're not really raising taxes, you've been losing ground in regards to taxes.**"

Add to that the huge budget deficit the state is anticipating, and Bohuslav expects lawmakers to look at raising the gas tax this legislative session. How far they get with that will depend on legislators like state Rep.-elect Paul Workman, R-Austin, one of the many freshman Republicans elected in November who gave the Texas GOP a supermajority in the state House. Many of those freshmen share Workman's views toward a **possible gas tax hike: "Right now, with the economy the way it is, no tax increases,"** Workman said.

"The long-term solution is that we've got to identify a more reliable mechanism to fund the needs of transportation," said Amadeo Saenz Jr., executive director of the Texas Department of Transportation. Saenz said greater fuel efficiency, increases in the cost of gas and the rise of the electric car will

spell an eventual end to the use of the gas tax, so his department asked the Texas Transportation Institute, or TTI, to look at what might be down the road for road funding. One idea is a vehicle mile-travel fee. **"So you pay based on the miles that you drive," Saenz said. "We right now have TTI looking at what the major issues that would have to be looked at should someone want to go in that direction."**

Other ideas thrown about at the forum: an end to the practice of diverting gas tax revenue to fund non-transportation projects, and a hike in vehicle registration fees.

Most refreshing was Pennsylvania's Governor Ed Rendell, in the forum's keynote speech, he held the attention of the audience as he addressed the bedraggled condition of our nation's roads and bridges by endorsing higher gas taxes and private toll roads, ringing in a blue northern version of unvarnished transportation talk.

"We used to be the best at everything, right?" asked Rendell, the former National Democratic Committee chairman. **"Now our transportation system is mediocre. ... What's happened to us?"**

What happened, Rendell said, is that politicians, although most understand the centrality of transportation to quality of life and the economy, have backed off and tucked tail on raising the revenue necessary to maintain existing infrastructure and to build what's needed. Will the new Congress increase the 18.4-cents-a-gallon gas tax that's been frozen at that level since 1993? Rendell asked, serving as his own straight man.

“Back to the Future” with the Grand Parkway

Harris County relinquished control of the Grand Parkway project to the Texas Department of Transportation at commissioners court January 11. The Grand Parkway project-or Hwy. 99- is a planned toll road loop surrounding the greater Houston area outside of Beltway 8.

Commissioners voted unanimously to give the project to TxDOT, ask TxDOT to reimburse the county for all project initiation costs and ask TxDOT to begin construction on segments of the parkway in 2011.

"The county has rescinded primacy for the Grand Parkway because county officials have been told that the state expects to have funding available for the project," said Eric Hanson, media relations coordinator for the Harris County Toll Road Authority. "The state and the county also have not been able to reach an agreement on how toll revenue from the road would be used."

Hanson said the county was looking for three main factors in an agreement over the use of Grand Parkway toll revenue. First, the county wanted to finance the Grand Parkway construction through its own toll resources. Second, the county wanted to use the parkway's toll revenue to finance infrastructure improvements in new development areas close to the project site. Finally, Hanson said the county did not want to risk the toll road's "financial integrity" through this project.

In regard to TxDOT's available funds, Raquelle Lewis, manager of public information for the Houston district of TxDOT, said the agency has \$425 million in under-run funds from various departments. However, the Texas Transportation Commission has to vote to approve the use of this money. Lewis said it is possible that the commission could vote to allocate the under-run funds to the Grand Parkway project in the near future. "We consider the Grand Parkway as a statewide priority as well as a priority for the Houston district area," she said. "It's a major connection for relieving congestion throughout the city, and it is a priority corridor for providing additional capacity to our system."

If funds were available, construction would most likely start on Segment E of the parkway, which stretches from I-10 to Hwy. 290, because HCTRA already designed and acquired some right of way clearance for this segment. The total construction costs for Segment E of the parkway is estimated at \$463.1 million. However, since TxDOT has so recently taken control of the project, Lewis said the agency does not have a definitive plan of action or any proposed construction dates available.

Without the Grand Parkway on its radar, HCTRA has plans to refocus its priorities, one of which is the Hempstead Tollway, a proposed toll road parallel to Hwy. 290. "We will continue to make improvements to the existing toll road system, and in the case of the proposed Hempstead Tollway, we will continue working with TxDOT to identify a project that will improve mobility in the corridor and can be developed in a financially responsible manner," Hanson said.



Special Guests Include:

The Honorable Ed Emmett,
Judge, Harris County

The Honorable Joe King,
Judge, Brazoria County

The Honorable Mark Henry
Judge, Galveston County

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BAYTRAN



Jack Morman
Precinct 2
Commissioner

Monthly Luncheon
February 16th
Jack Morman
Precinct Two Commissioner

Jack Morman was sworn in as Precinct Two Commissioner on Saturday, January 1, 2011 in a ceremony at the Harris County Civil Courthouse after winning an historic election on November 2, 2010.

Commissioner Morman believes in limited and efficient government and **will work to protect the taxpayer's interests in all matters while providing** the essential services mandated by county government.

Commissioner Morman is a graduate of Baylor University and Baylor University Law School and is licensed by the State of Texas to practice before the courts of the State of Texas as well as the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas.

As an experienced civil litigator he is well versed in a broad base of both public and private issues affecting the businesses and residents of Harris County.

Commissioner Morman and his wife Andrea graduated from Deer Park High School. They have two children, daughter Jordan and son Jack III.

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11:30– Registration & Program

12:00– Lunch & Program



Cullen's Upscale American Grille
11500 Space Center Blvd.
Houston, TX 77058

If you know anyone that would like to be added to our email database please email: Stevie.Jones@gcli.com



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