

# Perry's Highway to Nowhere

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On Saturday, Texas Governor Rick Perry will [announce](#) that he intends to run for president. Perry will bring a lot of conservative rhetoric to the GOP field, but what about his actual record? The truth is, not all of Perry's policies have been successful and some of them may not fit the Tea Party's definition of "conservative."

Over the last decade, Perry saw his most ambitious transportation infrastructure plan, the Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC), torn apart in the state legislature by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Although his plan for a massive 4,000 mile superhighway proposal did not succeed, the governor's conduct over a decade between his plan's proposal and collapse can lend us insight into the scope of his vision, the thinking behind his governing, and the way he handles those who oppose him.

The project might give pause to those who are inclined to support Perry should he run for president. The TTC project was more Lyndon B. Johnson than Ron Paul since it was a massive government undertaking. Although it was proposed to be financed largely by private equity, it also relied on federal funds and the widespread use of eminent domain.

Most importantly, Perry proposed the boldest infrastructure project in Texas history – and failed to get it passed. Whatever one’s thoughts might be on former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney’s healthcare policies, he was able to get his landmark proposals through.

### **Perry’s Grand Vision – The Trans-Texas Corridor**

In 2002, Governor Rick Perry confronted a gargantuan challenge – with the population of Texas doubling over the next few decades, how could you upgrade infrastructure to meet their needs? The revenues certainly weren’t there – in 2007, for example, Texas’ transportation budget included only enough money to maintain existing roads, and none for expansion. Undoubtedly, this was insufficient for a state which sees a net population growth of one thousand people per day.

“It is a really big problem in Texas because the funding is not really there, and the solutions available are all really bad. You could raise taxes... but Governor Perry would never, never do that,” said Matt Mackowiak, a Washington, D.C. and Austin, Texas-based Republican strategist.

Perry met this grand challenge with a grand solution: The Trans Texas Corridor. The TTC would have been a fifty-year build-out of a 4,000 mile superhighway system, with routes for cars, separate lanes for trucking, space for freight rail, and still more room for high-speed passenger rail. And if this were not enough, the TTC also included utility corridors for electric lines, transmission lines and pipelines that would have run parallel to the roads. All told, the superhighway would be up to 1,200 feet wide, and every mile of highway would require well over two hundred acres of land.

The TTC would route traffic around urban areas, allow for faster movement of goods, and route hazardous freight routes and pipelines out of populated zones. The TTC addressed “concerns that pipelines built through urban areas were carrying hazardous materials, and there was also the prospect of train derailments near schools and sensitive areas,” said Steven Polunsky, the director of the Texas legislature’s Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security from 2006 to 2010.

### **Proposal and Collapse**

The project actually required minimal public funding from the state, relying on federal grants as well as bonds that were issued in expectation of future revenues from tolls.

But opposition rallied against the TTC for other reasons. It was revealed that a large portion of the corridor would be planned by a Spain-based company called Sintra, and some people objected to the foreign involvement. Others were repulsed at the prospect

that their land could be seized for the project – and given the scope of the project, a large number of individuals were potential stakeholders.

“It was basically going to be a superhighway, that a foreign company was going to build, that was going to require the state to seize some of that land, some of which have been ranches that have been around for generations,” said Mackowiak.

Still others opposed the privatization of the highway system. “I contend that Texas is rich enough to build its own highways,” Republican State Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, a legislator known for her outspoken opposition to the proposal of her own party’s governor, told [FrumForum](#), adding, “I’m from a rural area, and the amount of land that [the TTC] was going to take from us was incredible.”

Steven Polunski, who served in the state legislature on the Transportation Committee at the time when the TTC was being considered, recalls the xenophobia and misinformation that was evident at one public forum considering the corridor: “This woman said, ‘My home has been in my family since we got it in the Spanish land grant, and I’ll be damned if I give it back.’ There was actually a perception that because of the [Spanish] participation in the finance aspect, that the road itself would be foreign territory.”

But the grand vision for superhighways built through Texas was most damned by environmental regulations. The environmental concerns of such a large project were one thing – the noise from the highway would render areas up to a mile away uninhabitable, for example – but the real roadblock was the process.

“The National Environmental Policy Act makes you look at viable alternatives... they will pick several [routes], then focus in on two, three, four, five ... rather than just picking one route,” explained Dr. Jim Rogers, the program director for Environmental Science at West Texas A&M University. “What is going to happen when you do this is that you have all sorts of potential stakeholders, and a lot more people to deal with.”

Indeed, the vast majority of Texas’ 254 counties were *potentially* affected by this project. The grassroots pushback was enormous. “This is pre-tea party. I actually think the beginnings of the tea party started, in a way, here in Texas through the gatherings in opposition to the plan,” said State Rep. Kolkhorst.

“There was a lot of uncertainty. Where is it going? No one could say where it was going,” said Polunsky. “Is it going over your farm? Is it going over the Burger King? And so you had a lot of people out there saying, ‘wait a minute, my farm could be at risk! My business could be at risk! My home could be at risk!’” By 2006, the Texas Republican Party’s platform called for the immediate halt of TTC planning, in open defiance of the party’s governor.

“These concerns eventually outweighed the legislative ability, or will, to advance it any further. So ultimately the plans were, one by one, stripped,” said Polunsky.

In 2007, State Rep. Lois Kolkhorst authored and passed what she deemed to be the “kill-shot” that ended the viability of the TTC – a two-year moratorium on private equity funding for transportation infrastructure. This year, Kolkhorst carried the bill which formally struck the TTC from Texas state law.

### **How Does This Failure Affect Governor Perry?**

The problems that Governor Perry was trying to address in 2002 – the lack of transportation infrastructure for a fast-growing state – remain today, in large part due to the collapse of the TTC project. No doubt Perry would be touting the infrastructure project as a conservative accomplishment if it had not been abandoned – so why shouldn’t he deserve blame now for his failure to get it done?

Some don’t think that the TTC will be an issue in a Perry presidential campaign. “This is one of six or seven issues that opposition researchers will dig into and look at, and candidates will try to attack him on... [but] I don’t think it will have much resonance,” says Mackowiak. “It didn’t happen – the resonance of an idea that you put forward but didn’t actually become an actual policy is nowhere as resonant as something you did that didn’t work.”

But the fact that it didn’t happen could also be a criticism. If one of the largest projects Perry set out to accomplish turned out to be a failure, what does this say about the potential presidential candidate?

Further, it does seem hypocritical that a governor who once [mused about secession](#) would be so open to federal grant money. “He is like a lot of conservative governors, who criticize and rail against the federal government when they are actually on the federal gravy train, and happy to ride it... Perry had a whole office – the Texas Office of State-Federal Relations – that tries to grab federal grant money,” notes Chris Edwards, director of Tax Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. In fact, the TTC plans for funding included lists for federal grants that could have been used to construct the corridor.

To be sure, questions about why Perry – an adamant states-rights advocate – would be so accepting of federal funds might arise. Property-rights activists could quite fairly question Perry’s willingness to use eminent domain to appropriate massive tracts of land. Still others might question his willingness to allow foreign investment in the project. “It’s a hard message for him to communicate,” concedes strategist Matt Mackowiak, who says he would be supportive of Perry if the governor decided to run for president.

On the positive side, the process showed how Governor Perry’s style – that even those who oppose him show him respect. Kolkhorst, a Republican who vehemently dissented from her governor’s plan, notes that she “respects Governor Perry’s grand visions,” even though “it was a battle.” Despite any tension that might have existed between herself and the governor, she admired his style. “We had heated conversations about my opposition,

but in the end he respected the legislature's direction. It takes a pretty big man to say, 'Okay, we're not going to do this. The Trans-Texas Corridor is dead,'" said Kolkhorst.

But even with this considered, the failure of what could have been a landmark piece of legislation is no credential a presidential candidate wants to have. Romneycare might be a disaster from a strategic perspective, but Governor Romney did at least show his ability to get a signature achievement into law. What about Gov. Rick Perry?

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