



The Highway Lobby

You don't have to live long in Texas to understand how the state's transportation needs can physically transform the state. The new roads needed to sustain the rapid growth in areas like Frisco cut through a landscape that was recently relatively untouched. And most Texans have some experience with the traffic that results when infrastructure doesn't keep up with growth. Despite all the visible ways that transportation touches our lives every day, we often see very little of the organized interests behind our highways. That was not always true. For years the "Highway Lobby" was one of the most influential forces in Texas politics.

The Highway Lobby emerged as the state accelerated its transition from rural to urban. The Constitution of 1876 had been written for a slow-moving state that was about 8 percent urban. The importance of

lobbying is evident when you realize that highway construction was one of the few industries that is completely dependent on government funding. And Texas needs lots of roads. Farmers and ranchers needed a system of farm-to-market roads to allow them to bring their products to market. Sprawling cities and suburbs need city highways to whisk workers to and from work. The large, open spaces of Texas meant that lots of residents needed roads to get them to friends and family.

The Texas Good Roads Association (TGRA), initially founded in 1903, played a critical role in the legislation that created the Texas Highway Department in 1917 and has been an important player in Texas politics since then. The success of TGRA did not rely on spending money. Much of their success grew naturally from Texans'

need for and love for the cars and trucks that moved them around the state. The TGRA often chose leaders with no direct connection to the companies that built highways and instead looked to respected members of communities that relied on highways. In this regard, the Highway Lobby is one of the state's first examples of grasstop lobbying.

The success of the TGRA is clear. By the 1940s, improvements in Texas roads pulled farmers and ranchers out of the mud roads and gave them a way to bring their products to markets. The Texas highway system was the largest and, considered by many, the best in the nation. While the TGRA may have been overshadowed by other groups in recent years, their impact is still evident in the state's commitment to its transportation infrastructure.