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Bexar County may beat state at retooling toll road agency

[Jaime Castillo](#) - Jaime Castillo

A major bill being pushed by San Antonio Democratic Rep. Ruth Jones McClendon to consolidate several agencies dealing with local transportation policy hasn't even been assigned to a legislative committee.

But that hasn't stopped the politicking back here in Bexar County.

At least three county commissioners — Tommy Adkisson, Sergio “Chico” Rodriguez and Kevin Wolff — are mulling an effort to dissolve the Regional Mobility Authority, perhaps even before the Legislature acts on the consolidation effort.

In separate interviews, all three said the RMA, the toll road agency that has been the subject of intense criticism, is saddled — rightly or wrongly — with a perception that it's a lapdog for the Texas Department of Transportation.

“I just think the RMA is a fifth wheel,” Adkisson said. “We ought to fold its powers into VIA. The time has come.”

Until now, local officials have been focused on the legislative effort, which would collapse the RMA and VIA Metropolitan Transit into the Advanced Transportation District, the voter-approved entity that currently uses a quarter-cent sales tax for road, bus and transportation improvements.

Rodriguez said he doesn't want to do anything to harm the consolidation effort, which is designed to streamline transportation efforts as local leaders ponder new efforts for light rail and expanded rapid bus service.

But he said the RMA's only current reason for being is a pair of recently awarded projects to add ramps at the interchange of Loop 1604 and U.S. 281 and to alleviate gridlock on a northern stretch of 281 with a “superstreet” concept.

“The RMA only has one hanger to hang its clothes on,” Rodriguez said. “We can transfer those projects elsewhere.”

Bill Thornton, the RMA's chairman, bristled at suggestions that the agency doesn't perform a valuable public function and that it's too closely allied with TxDOT.

“If you give up on the RMA, you're giving up local control that will just fall back to Austin,” he said.

“Had we not had the RMA and the right of first refusal, we would've had that Spanish company handling the projects around 281.”

Thornton was referring to Cintra, a private company that was part of the state's initial plans to build a network of tolled lanes in northern Bexar County.

Wolff said he's “been trying to understand the viability of the RMA, and I can't come up with anything.”

But he said he'd like to see a legal opinion regarding the transfer of the RMA's powers before he commits to moving forward.

“I'll know shortly what we'll lose if it goes away,” Wolff said.

The commissioner's father, County Judge Nelson Wolff, said he doesn't think doing away with the RMA is the right approach.

“It would be my position to let the consolidation process work itself out,” he said.

However, it takes only three votes on the five-member Commissioners Court to get something passed.

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