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Date: April 6, 2011

Source: Dallas Morning News

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Some Texas speed limits could be bumped to 85, the fastest in nation

By CHRISTY HOPPE and TERRENCE STUTZ

The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN — Texans might enter life in the fastest lane under a bill the House approved Wednesday, authorizing an 85-mph speed limit on highways.

The measure gives the state Department of Transportation power to raise the speed limit on designated lanes or entire stretches of roadway after performing engineering and traffic studies.

The 85-mph limit would be the highest in the nation.

“They have high-speed roadways in Europe, and there could be some merit in having some of those highways in Texas,” said the bill’s author, Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham. “Given the right engineering, we should consider it.”

The House tentatively passed it on a voice vote with no dissents, although insurance industry and safety advocates said later the idea is too risky. A similar proposal is awaiting full Senate action.

The provision is included in a bill that would put the final stake in the Trans Texas Corridor by stripping the terminology from any existing laws. The mega-highway pushed by Gov. [Rick Perry](#) enraged private land-rights advocates, and the 4,000-mile project was canceled two years ago.

But part of what was envisioned for the corridor were engineered stretches in which drivers could go 85 mph. Kolkhorst decided to keep that.

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"The Europeans drive pretty fast; I'm not sure all Americans are ready for those kinds of speeds," she said. "I want to keep this on the table."

80 already out west

Texas already has 521 miles of interstate highways in which the speed limit is 80, all of it in far West Texas on the roads leading to El Paso.

For the folks traveling those empty, long stretches, the higher speed is warranted and wanted, said Rep. [Joe Pickett](#), D-El Paso.

Along Interstate 10 with the 80-mph speed limit "is as nice a road as you can build; it's flat with a long line of sight, wide lanes and good shoulders," he said.

"For people like us who travel that long distance, it could be good," he said of an 85-mph speed limit.

But Jerry Johns of the Southwestern Insurance Information Service said it's a terrible idea.

"Obviously, the two things that kill most people on our highways are speed and alcohol," Johns said. "Increasing it to 85, or even 75, will have a dramatic impact on the death and injury rate on those highways where it's implemented."

Johns said that in 70-mph zones, drivers already push past 75 or 80. Given permission to go 85, the impulse for some motorists will be to go even faster.

"But 85 mph is simply too fast to drive even on a flat road. Any little hitch can cause an accident at that speed," he said. "There is still traffic on those roads, and to drive 85 mph is simply ludicrous."

Safety opponents of the bill also have said that standard tires on most cars are rated for long-term travel at 80 mph or less. Special tires, such as those used by law enforcement vehicles, are recommended for travel at high speeds over a long distance.

Safety analysis

Kelli Petras of the Texas Department of Transportation said the department has yet to do the kind of speed and safety analysis on roadways that is called for under the bill.

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In addition to wide lanes and flat surfaces, the agency also would probably look at other hindrances to high speed, such as road traffic and the presence of entrance and exit ramps.

"It would be awesome to travel it, but you'd have to look at the safety and other factors," she said.

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