

**Texas Department of
Transportation
Vehicle Registration Study
June, 2005 Focus Group Results and
Recommendations**

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Report on General Public Focus Groups

Executive Summary

- One consistent finding in all of the groups was that only a few people thought of automobile registration as a major source of funding for highway construction and maintenance. Those who did mention it tended to do so because of the notation of road and bridge maintenance fees that appear on the reminder notice.
- When asked how they knew when to register, almost all participants responded they knew when they received their reminder notices. About half indicated they would not realize their registration was due if they did not receive these notices.
- There were very significant differences in the level of knowledge in the two Spanish-speaking groups, compared to those conducted in English. Spanish speakers, unsurprisingly, were much less knowledgeable than their English-speaking counterparts. For example, in our Spanish speaking groups there was considerable confusion between automobile titles and registration.
- Among newcomers, there was a low level of knowledge about the registration process and about how long they have to register their car in Texas.
- Participants' perceptions about why people might not register breaks down into four categories, the unaware/forgetful, procrastinators, those who can't afford to pay, and those who intentionally avoid getting their cars registered.
- While a good number of participants looked at failure to have a current registration as a trivial offense, after learning how the registration fees are spent most saw this failure as not only illegal, but wrong.
- In discussing what types of messages would be most effective in a campaign to encourage people to have a current registration, participants targeted telling people where the money was spent and the individual consequences for failing to register.
- Finally, we talked about the tone of the message. While some respondents said that only a very punitive tone would work with the "hard core" evader, the most common response was to use a tone of pride and fulfilling your obligation.

Methodology

A total of nine focus groups were conducted across Texas. Two groups were conducted in each, El Paso and Pharr, one in Spanish and one in English. One group was conducted in each of the other five cities. These cities were: Dallas, Houston, Amarillo, Longview and Waco.

Participants were recruited from four different sources, a general sample, a list of people who had moved to Texas in the last 18 months, a list of license plates that had been recorded as having expired registrations in the 2004 or 2003 parking lot surveys (these were matched to individuals and phone numbers) and homes that had been observed with cars bearing Mexico license plates parked at them. Phone look-ups were done to match these addresses with telephone numbers.

Once phone numbers were obtained, potential participants we called and asked to participate in a group discussion about road transportation issues in Texas. Potential participants were offered an incentive of \$60 to take part in a discussion group.

The first group was held on June 2 and the last on June 13, 2005. A total of 92 people participated in the study.

One additional point worth noting is that, despite of our efforts to recruit participants with Mexico plates (six people identified as probably having a car with Mexico plates agreed to participate), not one person with such a plate came to our groups. This result emphasizes the extent to which such people are trying to “fly under the radar.”

Results

Issues related to road transportation

We began the focus groups by asking participants what issues came to mind when people think about road transportation. In almost every group the first topic mentioned was construction. Other frequently mentioned topics in almost every group were traffic, road quality and driver behavior.

Representative quotes:

“Construction and people on cell phones; and a lack of caution in school zones are three major problems.”

“People racing to get to work, racing home, they don’t mind cutting someone off. Road rage seems to be the way to go around here.”

“There is a lot of construction and it doesn’t ever seem to get better.”

Sources of funding for road construction and maintenance

In response to our question about funding sources for road construction and maintenance, we found that people are not very knowledgeable. While people realize the money is from the public sector they have little idea about specific funding sources. The most common response to our question was “taxes.” When asked to be more specific, most participants were at a loss. Among those who were able to be more specific we heard about gasoline taxes, traffic fines, drivers’ license renewal fees and automobile registration. Those who mentioned automobile registration as a source of revenue almost always pointed to the bridge and road fee that appears on the renewal form.

Representative quotes:

“It comes from taxes; sales taxes and income taxes.”

“Penalties and fines charged to DUI’s; traffic tickets.”

“I feel that the money that is coming in for the state of Texas is money from the Department of Transportation in Washington filtered down through representatives”

“It comes from gasoline taxes and sales taxes on automobiles.”

“Drug busts.”

“Some money comes from the bridge and road fees that are part of the cost of registration.”

Function of registration

When asked about the function of registration, most participants talked about it as a means to provide an accurate database about who was driving what vehicle. Many saw it as a kind of census for cars. They also saw it as a way to check on stolen vehicles and to be sure people were carrying insurance. Only a very few of our participants mentioned registration as a way to help pay for roads and road maintenance.

Representative quotes:

“It is a way to keep track of people and what they drive.”

“It’s for identification purposes

“It provides proof that your car is not a stolen car.”

“It helps insure safety and protection from theft.”

“Registration helps keep track of the number of vehicles on roads.”

“It provides assurance you have insurance.”

“Off-setting costs of wear on the roads.”

With the exception of the road and bridge fee, participants had almost no idea how the registration fees are spent. The vast majority was unaware that any of the money stayed in the county.

Frequency and cost of registration

In most of our groups almost everyone understood that registration was due once a year. The two exceptions to this were the Spanish speaking groups in El Paso and Pharr. In these two groups there was some confusion between an automobile title and registration. The following were some off target responses about how often one needs to register their car.

“When you renew your driver’s license.”

“When you purchase car insurance.”

“You need to register when you get a new car.”

When asked how they knew when it was time to register their cars, the vast majority responded they knew it was time when they received their renewal notices. Roughly half of the participants said they would not know to register if they had not received their notices.

While participants didn't know how the registration fee was spent, they were very aware of how much it cost. Almost everyone knew approximately how much they paid to register their cars and about a fourth gave very precise amounts for their registration fee.

Method of registration

A high percentage of participants reported that they went to the county tax assessor collectors' office, or a substation, to pay their registration. Somewhat less than half reported paying by mail. A few indicated they had paid at a subcontractor such as HEB, although this varied a great deal by location (in some of our locations there were subcontractors) and only one had paid via the Internet.

When asked why they had gone to the tax assessor collectors' office rather than use any of the alternatives a common response was that they felt this method was more secure. Another reason was that they waited too long after receiving their notice to register by mail.

Representative quotes:

"I wait until the last minute to register."

"I want to be sure it doesn't get lost in the mail."

"I just like to make sure it gets done."

There was a concern that attempting to register by mail just couldn't be trusted.

"The Motor Vehicle office should mail us an acknowledgement of our payment for our Registration renewal when we pay by mail...for security purposes."

While many of our participants registered at the tax assessor collector's office, this did not mean the process always went smoothly.

"The most aggravating part of getting your registration is the long line that you have to wait in, especially when everyone is there with different problems to handle. Some things may take 10 seconds while others can take half an hour."

"It depends on when you register, at the end of the month they have long lines."

When asked about registering over the Internet there was a considerable difference of opinion. While some liked the idea, others were concerned about security issues.

“I would be concerned about security.”

“It would be the easiest way to pay, I already pay other bills that way.”

The moderator asked participants whether they would know what to do to register if they did not have their renewal form and the vast majority indicated this would not pose a problem.

Texas Newcomers

In almost all of our groups we had participants who had moved to Texas in the past 18 months. We asked these participants about their knowledge and experience relative to Texas automobile registration.

The first topic covered in this part of the focus groups was how long people had to register their cars after they moved to Texas. Participants gave a wide range of responses to this question, from ten days to six months. A number believed they had until the registration from their previous state had run out.

“It never occurred to me when I moved here...I thought I would be able to keep my old tags for a while.”

There was a good deal of frustration about the registration process in Texas. A number of participants who had moved to Texas recently were surprised they could not take care of their registration at the same place they got their drivers license (the Department of Motor Vehicles). Several were also frustrated because they didn't know the sequence they needed to follow to get their registration done.

Representative quotes:

“My husband was angry because he waited in line to get his registration only to be told his proof of insurance card was not adequate and he had to bring his actual policy to get his registration.”

“I had to go to the old place in the Conway area. I did not know you needed a inspection sticker. I did not know that you needed the actually insurance policy to see how much you had. Just an insurance card does not work here. It was a really horrible process.”

“I have registered my car in several different states and you almost have to just thru hoop in Texas to become a Texan. Texas is a hard state to move to and adjust to.”

“I had to go from one building to another building. I did not have the proper form. They do not centralize anything to make it easier. I had a hard time finding out where to register. It was Hidalgo Pct 3, no it was the building next to it. It had the sign on it “The state of Texas” but did not have the zip on it, so it was hard to find. It was frustrating going to Edinburg. I went to the court house -no it is not in this building - go caddy corner - no it is on the other side of town.”

Perceptions of why some people don’t have current valid registrations

We asked participants why they thought some people did not have current valid automobile registrations. Responses fell into four categories: not realizing their registration was due, realizing it was due and planned to register but hadn’t gotten around to it, just couldn’t afford it, and purposely don’t register.

In the first category, people not realizing it was due, participants mentioned those who had not received their renewal notice and those who had received it but set it aside without thinking about it.

*“I drove around for three months without realizing my registration was due.”
Sometimes we inadvertently leave it to the last minute. We are busy with the children and don’t do it intentionally.*

The second category, procrastinators, was seen as people who planned to get their registration renewed but just hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

“Time is a factor. My wife moved down here a couple of months before I did. She was starting a new job, finding a house, starting the kids in school. So, that was really hard to get it down with the new work schedule and time limits.”

There was an interesting division among participants towards those who could not afford to register. Some felt that one had no business driving a car – that they should be using public transportation - if they couldn’t afford this fee. Others expressed considerable sympathy towards people who fell into this category, in part because they did not see public transportation as a viable alternative.

“I have worked with people who couldn’t pay their registration fee and I have even paid fee for some. You just can’t get by without a car.”

“If you are going to drive a car you need to pay for the registration. If you can’t afford you shouldn’t be driving.”

Lastly, those who purposely do not register, were seen as the hard core evaders. These were seen as people who may not have a valid title to their car, don't want to pay for insurance, have emissions problems, or are avoiding warrants or other legal problems. (It is noteworthy that many participants are sympathetic towards those who can't afford registration yet feel strongly that everyone needs to have insurance.)

“The car doesn't pass emission inspection.”

“Sometimes the cars are stolen or the owners have legal issues, like not paying child support.”

“A lot of times people don't register their cars because they don't have insurance.”

“Seeing an expired registration tag, I think there's a good chance the person doesn't have his car registered and I'm 99% sure they don't have insurance and he's probably driving without a driver's license because he has a DUI.”

Among our Spanish-speaking participants, issues often raised were related to people who have come from across the border.

“Not having a license and not being a legal resident. A person may not have the car title since so many cars are brought over (from Mexico) without titles.”

“Individuals may not have other necessary document in order. Fear of being illegal.”

“Sometimes it's a junk car and the individual uses it for short trips.”

In El Paso and Pharr participants knew of people in their neighborhoods who had Mexico plates, even though they had been living in the U.S. for some time. When asked if they thought those cars were covered by insurance, these participants said no.

Reaction to information about registration

At this point in the conversation participants were told that registration raises approximately one billion dollars a year. In comparison, the highway construction budget for Texas is about three billion a year. Participants were also told that about a third of the money from registration stays in the county and the money that goes to the state is spent on transportation including highway construction and maintenance, DPS, and TXDOT overhead expenses.

This information was very powerful in how people responded to registration. People tended to think of registration as a kind of black hole, they had to pay it but didn't think of it as producing value. Once they saw the value they received in return for what they paid, participants felt more positive about paying it and had a greater sense that this was something everyone should contribute to.

“To me, since I just had to this last month to get it renewed, it means more money out of my pocket but, when I stop to think about it, the bigger picture is it does go to help maintain roads and that important.”

Attitudes towards people failing to register

Participants were asked if they felt failure to maintain a current vehicle registration was trivial (although illegal), or wrong. We found a general swing in attitudes as participants talked about this issue. Initially, many participants felt that a person's failure to register was trivial and they were not concerned about whether others registered or not. As the discussion continued, several issues tended to change that attitude.

“I realize it's illegal but if I see someone without a sticker, it doesn't matter to me – they're the ones who'll get in trouble.”

“What bugs me more is seeing a smoking car burning down the road.”

“It give me two feelings – one, how do they get away with it and two I think if they live in Texas they need to abide by the laws. It is two contradicting feelings with me because I sure would like to know how they do it and get away with it”

“We ought to care. That's money out of our pockets. The money has to come from some place, so the people not paying them share – we pick up that amount.”

“It's an insult when people are not responsible enough to renew the registration in a timely manner. It's usually for other irresponsible reasons, such as suspended license or being an illegal resident.”

“It's part of everyone's responsibility. It's just one of those things that we know we have to keep up with...we know we have to feed our kids everyday. We don't just feed them one day and not the other. It's a responsibility that comes with owning a car.”

When told how the money from registration was used, participants felt everyone was affected when others failed to register. They felt they had to pay more because others were not paying their share.

A second issue was insurance. In the course of the discussion, participants agreed that those without current registrations were less likely to have insurance than those who do have current registration (although there was a pretty clear understanding that having a current registration is not a guarantee that someone has insurance.) Almost all of the participants felt very strongly about all motorists carrying liability insurance and many felt their insurance cost them more because of those who failed to have coverage.

“Some people may not have current a Texas Registration due to not having insurance. If this uninsured driver has a car accident, the insured driver is left with damages unjustly.”

“I think most of us feel the same way. We don’t know how many people are insured, but I think it might be a pretty high percentage. It is a very scary situation and we can’t know who has it or not unless we have routine traffic stops and such.”

The issue that some of the registration money stayed in the county was also effective in contributing to participants feeling that it was important to register.

Participants’ thoughts on a campaign to encourage people to register

At the conclusion of the focus groups we asked participants for their thoughts about a campaign to increase compliance with vehicle registration.

Participants were initially split with some favoring a coercive campaign along with greater enforcement by police and others taking a more positive approach. In our discussion it became apparent that the more coercive approach was really intended for the hard core evaders, while a more positive approach was for those whose failure to comply was not purposive.

When asked what kinds of messages need to be included in the effort, participants talked about making people aware of the issues and how the money they pay for registration contributes to highway transportation. They also felt it was important to educate people about the individual consequences of failing to comply, e.g. tickets, fines and difficulty in tracing a stolen car.

“When I write that check for registration I don’t think, gosh, I wish people paid their registration, but when I’m sitting in traffic I’m thinking, crap, why am I sitting here. At that point I see the reason behind it.”

“Even with Click it or Ticket, some people still don’t care so maybe Don’t Mess with Texas and Peace of Mind are best for reaching the people who just forget. (You don’t want to be harsh on these people.)”

“Show me the value, how is my money being spent.”

“Peace of mind. If you know you have your driver’s license, your registration, you don’t have to worry about your tail light being broken you fix it and move on to something else.”

“Motivate the public by explaining that the revenue goes to maintaining and improving roads and highways.”

“Stress is a privilege to drive & have responsibility to respond to that privilege by sharing expense keeping car in working condition, insured & registered.”

“ALERT! Check your registration. Avoid problems with the law.”

In terms of the tone of the campaign, participants were most attracted to a sense of pride which many compared to the “Don’t Mess With Texas” campaign.

“Appeal to people by tapping on their Texas Pride.”

Operational suggestions

In addition to their thoughts on communication, several participants had suggestions more related to operations.

There was considerable concern about those who could not afford to pay their registration fee and participants in several groups suggested a payment plan for those in financial straits.

A second suggestion was to have a place where new Texans could take care of all their vehicle related obligations - Texas drivers license and registration.

A third suggestion was for tax assessor collectors to have one day a week where they stayed open after regular business hours.

Conclusions and Recommendations

For the most part, drivers in Texas don't think much about their registration. When they get a renewal notice they generally take care of it, simply because most see it as a legal obligation. Many people see the issue of registration as a legal formality rather than any kind of a moral obligation. Newcomers to Texas are often not knowledgeable about the requirements or procedures for registering their automobiles.

Since many renewal notices do not reach their targets this suggests that one goal of a campaign to increase compliance is to simply raise awareness about registration and to get people to check their stickers.

Particularly among newcomers, an education campaign should increase timely compliance with Texas laws since many of the failures to comply are unintentional.

The results of this study clearly indicate that increasing Texans' understanding of the ways in which the money from registration helps create better and safer roads should reinforce a sense of obligation about paying registration among the general public. The results also indicate that it would be helpful to make people aware of the individual consequences of failure to register.

With the exception of the "hardcore evader," the results suggest a positive approach would be more productive than a more coercive one, particularly since many see the chances of being stopped for registration violations as high.