

TEXAS LEGISLATURE

Transportation advocates surprised by change in committee chairman

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ARLINGTON -- Squeezing more dollars from the state budget for roads and rail lines in [North Texas](#) was already an iffy prospect, at best.

But the effort to raise those dollars may now be even tougher, after Metroplex leaders learned that state Sen. John Carona, the Dallas Republican who for four years championed their efforts in Austin, had asked to be removed as chairman of the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security committee.

"We'll have to regroup," Denton County Transportation Authority Chairman Charles Emery of Lewisville, who closely follows legislative issues, said during a break Thursday at a Regional Transportation Council meeting in Arlington. "I don't have a real good feel for it."

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst this week announced several changes of Senate leadership positions in advance of the 2011 legislative session that begins in January.

Carona, the transportation chairman since 2006, will become chairman of the Senate Business and Commerce committee. Taking Carona's place as chairman of the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security committee will be state Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands.

Several North Texas officials took Carona's departure as a sign that efforts to increase state funding for transportation would be dead during the 2011 session and that his business experience would be more effective in his new committee.

Local-option elections

Carona did not return a call seeking comment.

Carona worked fiercely in 2009 to pass a bill that would have allowed metro areas to hold local-option elections and raise taxes for transportation, but the effort failed. Lawmakers have been very critical of how transportation funds are spent in the state and so far have not reached consensus on what sorts of fees -- if any -- should be raised to address the state's growing congestion problems.

Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said he was stunned to learn that Carona had resigned as chairman of the transportation committee.

"He has been a full, 100 percent partner with us," Morris said. "We're going to have to think through how we're going to proceed."

Legislative agenda

Despite the loss of Carona's leadership, RTC members Thursday debated several transportation-related pieces of legislation that they will consider supporting during the session. Among them would be provisions to:

Stop the diversion of motor-fuel taxes to non-transportation needs. In Texas, motorists pay a state gas tax of 20 cents per gallon, but a fourth of that money goes toward education. And millions of other dollars in the state's highway fund get diverted to non-highway projects.

Index the gas and diesel taxes to gradually increase over time, comparable to the cost of living -- and increase the tax by 10 cents per gallon.

Allow local-option elections so voters can decide if they want to raise car registration fees -- or mobility fees -- or fuel taxes.

Establish a "buy America" law to increase domestic involvement in private development of roads, an industry currently dominated by foreign companies. The Legislature has slammed the brakes on private development of toll roads, but many North Texas leaders want to change that law and allow private investment.

Strengthen buy-back provisions and eliminate non-compete clauses so that when a private developer is hired to build a toll road or other transportation project, Texans don't feel like their infrastructure is being sold off.

Buy-back provisions allow public agencies to buy back roads that have been leased to developers.

Non-compete clauses, which are opposed by many state leaders, are contract clauses that protect private road developers by prohibiting the Texas Department of Transportation from building a nontoll road in an area that would take business away from a toll road.

Several RTC members also called for a better effort in educating the public about how their existing dollars are being spent, and why more money is needed.

"We were effective in communicating with our legislators, but we didn't communicate our needs to the public," said RTC member and McKinney Councilwoman Gerayln Kever. "I think it's the public that's going to apply the pressure more than any one of us."

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