

A new direction for transportation policy in the Texas Senate?

Ben Wear, Getting There

BEN WEAR »



Updated: 5:10 a.m. Monday, July 19, 2010
Published: 8:59 p.m. Sunday, July 18, 2010

The news from the Capitol last week many Texas Senate committees got new chairmen, including the Transportation and Homeland Security Committee is the sort of classic inside-baseball political story that most real human beings take a pass on. Who cares which of 31 puffed-up potentates is handling which bills at the Capitol every two years?

Well, I can't necessarily promise to make you care. But in the case of the transportation committee, the replacement of state Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, with state Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, most certainly will make a difference.

Carona is that rare species in 2010 politics, a moderate Republican. During the past four years he has repeatedly called for an increase in the state gasoline tax, frozen at 20 cents a gallon since 1991. He failed in that effort. He also made something of a crusade in the 2009 session of a bill that would have allowed local governments to call elections asking voters to create a local gas tax, or other local fees, and spend the proceeds on roads or rail.

That legislation died in a bloody political conflagration in the session's final days.

But Carona, those quixotic attempts aside, has been highly effective during his two sessions as transportation chairman, alternately cuffing around Texas Department of Transportation officials and then making nice with them publicly after getting them to change direction. Carrying scores of transportation bills, passing many of them. Taking stands for what would work, even if it played badly in the blogosphere.

When the rest of the Legislature in 2007 and '09 was running headlong away from TxDOT's private toll road agreements, Carona was out there saying the state needed all the tools it could find to pay for transportation projects: higher taxes, both statewide and local; and tollways, both private and government-run.

Carona has been a transportation pragmatist.

Now, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst announced Wednesday, he'll have Carona chair the Business and Commerce Committee instead.

And Williams, who sat on the transportation committee for one term, in 2007, is its new chairman.

Williams made quite a stir in 2007, carrying and passing the main transportation bill, SB 792. That law did many things, including slap a moratorium on private toll road agreements. But mainly, from the point of view of Williams' friends on the Harris County Toll Road Authority, SB 792 told TxDOT to stop big-footing local toll road agencies.

Williams is more conservative than Carona, and it's a stretch to imagine him holding a news conference to call for raising the gas tax, or any tax, for that matter. So if Williams is not for more taxes, or private toll road payments, it's hard to see how TxDOT's increasingly dire funding situation will improve.

It's also hard to imagine Williams working anywhere near as well as Carona did with Austin's Democratic Sen. Kirk Watson, who has been vice chairman of the transportation committee the past two sessions and is close to Carona. But Watson said he has already reached out to Williams, and he plans to continue in the same role on the committee.

For questions, tips or story ideas, contact Getting There at 445-3698 or bwear@statesman.com.