



Get Houston Chronicle home delivery for only \$3 a week. Save 61%!

Special session still an option

Brinkmanship on transportation brings up new threat in Austin

By R.G. RATCLIFFE and JANET ELLIOTT AUSTIN BUREAU

May 31, 2009, 11:52PM



Harry Cabluck AP

Sen. John Carona talks about his idea for a filibuster on a transportation bill.

AUSTIN — State lawmakers on Sunday approved a windstorm insurance reform measure —

eliminating the need for a special session — but legislative brinkmanship on transportation and insurance created new threats that such a session will be necessary.

The Texas Legislature adjourns Monday night.

Expansion of the health insurance program for low-income children almost certainly is dead after House opponents blocked debate on the measure until one minute before a midnight deadline. The bill has been killed and resurrected three times in the past two weeks.

The House and Senate did send Gov. Rick Perry a compromise bill that revises the public school accountability system. It would lessen the importance of standardized testing, and use end-of-course exams in high school to measure college readiness. The House also approved a compromise to spend an additional \$1.9 billion on public schools over the next two years.

Legislation to promote seven Texas universities as emerging research institutions — including UT-San Antonio and the University of Houston — was temporarily derailed by Corpus Christi lawmakers before receiving House approval. The research university package includes \$150 million in bonding authority for construction of the Jennie Sealy surgical and bed tower at UTMB in Galveston. A state spending bill includes another \$150 million for the project.

While a state senator threatened to filibuster to death a bill reorganizing the Texas Department of Transportation because it did not contain a local option gas tax increase for regional road

Advertisement

Family Value Health
30 Day FREE Product Trial

SAVE 10 - 60%
ON YOUR HEALTH EXPENSES

- DENTAL DISCOUNTS
- VISION CARE DISCOUNTS
- DOCTOR & HOSPITAL DISCOUNTS
- PRESCRIPTION DISCOUNTS
- 24/7 PHYSICIAN ACCESS - TelaDoc™

www.fvhcard.com

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



construction, a House member who wanted the same used a House rule to delay the bill to an almost certain death on a midnight deadline.

Negotiators reached an agreement on reforming the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association.

The association provides windstorm insurance in 14 coastal counties and part of Harris County where private insurers refuse to provide the insurance as part of a home-owner's policy.

But Hurricanes Ike and Dolly wiped out the insurance pool last year with more than \$2 billion in expected claims, and private insurers were worried about the potential of unlimited assessments against them to keep the windstorm pool alive if there was another major storm this year.

The agreement essentially would cover excessive claims through short-term loans from the state and long-term bonds to be paid for by windstorm premiums.

"There are no rate increases coming to the coast because of this," said Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay, the Senate sponsor.

Both the transportation bill and the expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program were falling victim to opposition from the right wing of the Republican Party.

The Texas Republican Party, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, Americans for Prosperity and the Texas Eagle Forum worked successfully to kill a portion of a transportation bill that would have

allowed county governments to hold elections to raise gas taxes by 10 cents a gallon for local projects.

Anger over the removal of the gas tax from the TxDOT reauthorization led to threats of a filibuster by Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Chairman John Carona, R-Dallas.

The local-option gas tax was supported by officials from North Texas and San Antonio, but had significant opposition from Houston-area lawmakers and rural legislators.

"I'm 250 pounds; I've got a lot of energy and I feel very passionate about this," Carona said.

Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, the original sponsor of the local option proposal, said the groups distorted her proposal into looking like a tax increase even though it would require the approval of local voters.

She said the opposition groups made it impossible for many Republicans to consider voting for the proposal.

"It's all about the primary," Truitt said, adding, "You have a senator with a radio program who's hammering the Houston folks daily."

Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, who owns KSEV-AM (700) in Houston, said he has spoken against the measure in the past, but not in at least two weeks. Patrick said he opposes the local option because he believes in a statewide solution to transportation.

Advertisement



Send flowers for any occasion
Bouquets \$19.99
 from **\$19.99** ^{+s/h}
ProFlowers®

Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
 or call 1-877-888-0688

Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics™**



“Let’s say that Montgomery County doesn’t vote to increase tax by 10 cents and Harris County does, and you have a convenience store one mile apart on each side of the line. You’ll put one store out of business,” Patrick said. “They’ll drive a mile to save 10 cents a gallon. That’s a lot of money.”

The bill to expand eligibility for the Children’s Health Insurance Program from 200 percent of the federal poverty level to 300 percent had died twice in this session.

r.g.ratliffe@chron.com

janet.elliott@chron.com

Advertisement

Family Value Health

30 Day
FREE Product Trial

SAVE 10 - 60%
ON YOUR HEALTH EXPENSES

- DENTAL DISCOUNTS
- VISION CARE DISCOUNTS
- DOCTOR & HOSPITAL DISCOUNTS
- PRESCRIPTION DISCOUNTS
- 24/7 PHYSICIAN ACCESS - TelaDoc™

www.FVHCARD.COM

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™