

Dallas bills caught up in stall over voter ID

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AUSTIN – Several measures considered priorities for Dallas lawmakers could be in trouble if House Democrats stall legislative business long enough to prevent a vote on a partisan voter identification bill.

Dallas Democrats say they're confident they can still find a way to pass the bills – which include solar power incentives, gang-fighting tools and a constitutional amendment to support university research funding – by Monday, the last day of the legislative session.

But a key deadline hits tonight at midnight, and legislation that hasn't passed the House can't be considered as a standalone measure. Lawmakers would then have to add the measures to other legislation in the final days of the session or persuade their colleagues to suspend the House's rules and allow the bills to come up.

"Even though the deadline is approaching, at the end of the day, we'll find a way to get together to vote on these things to come forward," said Rep. Allen Vaught, a Dallas Democrat who has not participated in his party's stall tactics. "We'll do it for what's important."

But some North Texas Republicans – particularly senators watching their bills wilt in the House – say they're losing hope.

The House standoff over voter ID, a measure that would require Texans to present a photo ID or two forms of other identification to vote, is jeopardizing the Senate's hard work, they argue, as many bills that began in the Senate are on the House's agenda after voter ID.

And the battle is killing health insurance and foster care measures that would improve their constituents' lives, local senators say.

"It's heartbreaking that some of the bills we have worked for a year on – really important policy – are on life support," said Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound.

Meanwhile, they're doing everything they can to find homes for their bills. These include bills to allow gas taxes to raise money for transportation projects, to give cities leeway to target high-crime businesses, and to put restrictions on idling trucks. Lawmakers can try to attach seemingly unrelated measures to bills that are still alive, if the bills' legislative descriptions are sufficiently broad.

One of Dallas' top priorities – a resolution to ask voters to approve funding to make more Texas universities major research centers – will either be passed by suspending the House rules or be handled in a special legislative session, said Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas. He said the measure isn't in hot water.

"When you work very hard all session like we have, you never like to see this type of conclusion," said Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas. "But I've been here enough sessions to know you can't be overly discouraged."