

# House moves to kill state transportation commission

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The House voted Thursday to forward to the Senate a bill that would abolish the Texas Transportation Commission and severely chastise the 14,000-employee Department of Transportation.

The House wants to replace the five commissioners who govern the agency with one who is elected statewide every four years. In addition, the state would be divided into as many as 12 regions, each of which would elect its own regional transportation commissioner.

Whether these steps – and many others, contained in scores of amendments considered late into Thursday night – will survive in the Senate is far from clear. Some successful amendments were staunchly opposed by senior leaders in the House, including transportation Chairman Joe Pickett, D-El Paso. Amendments can easily be stripped out of a bill once the legislation reaches the conference committee at the end of the session.

But for one night, anyway, the House was able to make good on threats, made over the past two years, to rein in an agency many lawmakers feel has been unresponsive to them and too enamored with private toll roads.

Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving, one of the agency's most vocal critics, laid out her complaint simply: TxDOT, she said, can no longer be trusted. "It's a matter of transparency and trust."

Perhaps the biggest change, should it be included in the Senate version and passed into law, would be the creation of a legislative oversight committee that would for the next four years examine every level of decision-making at the agency. The committee would have the authority to hire a management consultant team to evaluate the department's efficiency and would monitor each of the department's many research projects.

One exception: The six-member committee would not make decisions as to which highway and bridge projects would be funded. That power, and with it control of much of the agency's \$8 billion budget, would remain with the agency and its commissioner.

It wasn't immediately clear what the role of the regional commissioners would be. But Pickett, the transportation chairman, has said in the run-up to the vote Thursday that he wants local areas to have a bigger say in what projects are built and when.

Some members argued in favor of keeping the five-member commission, though Pickett and others want to give the House speaker and lieutenant governor more say in at least

two of the appointments. Current law gives the governor exclusive power to appoint the commissioners.

"There is a geographic balance around the state," with the existing system, said Rep. Carl Isett, R-Lubbock, author of the bill being debated Thursday night and the chairman of the Sunset Advisory Commission that evaluated the department over much of the past year. "We looked at this carefully, and the problem appears to me to be with the culture inside the agency" – not with the governance of the department.

But even as the House rejected his view, the fight is far from over.

Chris Lippincott, spokesman for the transportation department, said the bill represents only the first step of a long legislative end-game.

"The House gets a first whack at this, and the House is where you are going to hear some of the more extreme proposals," he said. "The Senate will take a whack at it, too, and then send it back to the House. ... There is a lot left to be done."