

Dallas senator promises to filibuster transportation bill

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AUSTIN – A Dallas senator was preparing Sunday to shut down Senate action on a massive transportation bill through a filibuster that he vowed would last until the Senate closes out its session today.



HARRY CABLUCK/The Associated Press

Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas: 'It is important that we raise transportation as one of the top issues of this state.'

Sen. John Carona, contending that the measure holds little benefit for most Texans, said he would launch a filibuster against the measure when it comes up for debate early today.

The Republican is particularly upset over deletion of a provision that would have allowed local option taxes to pay for transportation projects.

"For 250 pounds, I have a lot of energy and I feel very passionate about this. ... It's obvious that the Legislature and the state's top leaders don't consider this a big enough issue at this point," he said.

Under the Senate tradition of a filibuster, Carona can speak against the bill as long as he stands at his desk and refuses to yield the floor to another senator. If he can filibuster until midnight tonight – or until the Senate adjourns – he will kill the transportation bill.

During a Capitol news conference, Carona pulled no punches in leveling criticism at Gov. Rick Perry and legislative leaders for not doing more to give substance to the legislative session and deal head-on with the state's biggest problems, such as transportation.

"If there is one prevailing theme of this session, it is an utter lack of leadership," Carona said.

"There is no agenda for this legislative session. It's like a Seinfeld episode. It's the session without a purpose," he said. "We need elected officials all the way to the top – and I'm speaking of Governor Perry and our top three leaders – who will come here and not only set an agenda, but also work to help us pass it."

Perry's press secretary, Allison Castle, said the governor was not to blame.

"Governor Perry has always been a leader on transportation issues," she said. "This bill went through the legislative process, and the senator's initiative to raise taxes across the state did not have the support of members."

Carona, chairman of the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee, cited the resistance of some leaders to a provision to allow local elections to raise taxes for transportation – which many viewed as a potential campaign problem for officeholders seeking re-election next year.

"I come here to tackle the state's problems. Some of those are pretty tough, and we're expected to cast tough votes when it matters," he said.

Carona reserved some of his harshest criticism for the author of the transportation bill, GOP Sen. Glenn Hegar of Katy.

Noting that Hegar secretly negotiated on the transportation bill with House members – but not with the other four senators who were supposed to negotiate with the House – Carona accused his colleague of being "deceitful" and "dishonest" before he brought a compromise back to the Senate.

"He should have handled this in a more honorable fashion," Carona said.

Hegar called the criticism "unfair" and said he was working in good faith to find a bill that could pass the House and Senate. The only way to do that, he and others have said, was to exclude local option taxes.

"Senator Carona's distortions sadden me because not only are they patently false, but because he is also attempting to reinvent history," Hegar said.

The Senate continued work on scores of other bills Sunday evening, trying to get as many passed as possible before taking up the transportation bill and initiating Carona's filibuster.