

Dallas Morning News

Point Person: John Carona

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Sen. John Carona of Dallas was a primary force in the legislative session that ended last week. He carried the local-option transportation bill for North Texas, and after its defeat, he brought down the massive TxDOT reform bill with a filibuster threat. The session ended with his criticism of the state's top three leaders, all fellow Republicans – Gov. Rick Perry, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and House Speaker Joe Straus – for lack of vision and leadership.

In the context of confronting major challenges, you said this was a *Seinfeld* legislative session, and you singled out top leaders for criticism. What reverberations have you felt?

Well, let's say that the leaders weren't necessarily happy. Lt. Gov. Dewhurst is always particularly sensitive to remarks like that. He does spend a tremendous amount of time on the job and looking at the issues. Gov. Perry obviously was disappointed.

Do you regret the remark?

I have no regrets whatsoever. I still believe that in fact describes the session. It was a session without a purpose.

Every session ought to be marked by three or four primary objectives. Typically these are going to be the issues that speak to the future of the state, and rarely are they the easy issues. It's incumbent on our state's top three leaders to go into every legislative session with a clear agenda of things we're to accomplish and a timeline for doing so. This session, in my view, saw none of those things.

Your local-option transportation bill fell short despite lots of hard work in Austin and North Texas. What would you do differently if you had a re-do?

I would work to have ensured vocal support from the governor, the lieutenant governor, the speaker.

The fact of the matter is, we came very close. We had overwhelming support in the Senate, we initially had overwhelming support among Senate conferees, and we believe we had sufficient support in the House to actually pass the measure. The only place we failed to get support was among House conferees. I believe had the state's top leaders been behind this bill the appropriate conferees would have been appointed to ensure passage.

Hard conservatives were among the biggest obstacles to local option. How do you win on that front?

There is a prevailing attitude among the most conservative members that they simply refuse to vote for any tax increase whatsoever no matter how important the cause. When you deal with people who have a predisposition to not necessarily doing the responsible thing, but choosing instead to do the political thing, it's very difficult to change their minds and hearts.

The session's big TxDOT bill died after your filibuster threat over local option. Would you do it again?

Were I given the choice to do it again, I absolutely would do so. It's imperative we keep the issue of transportation funding alive.

What should the average Texan know about the state's transportation future at current funding levels?

They need to understand that this is absolutely urgent. We will run out of money to build new roads in the state by the year 2012. And even more significant, we have failed to raise the very tax that funds road building since 1991. This is not merely about pouring concrete. It's about ensuring our economic development in the future, and it's about clean air.

You were on opposite sides from your Republican Party on transportation funding, and you broke with Senate Republicans on allowing voter ID to be taken up. Are you and the GOP in sync?

I think we are. I've been a Republican since I was a young college student, and I don't anticipate any change whatsoever. And while I consider myself a rather strong conservative, I recognize to get things done you have to reach out to the middle.

Simple arithmetic here requires that the Republican Party reach out to people of moderate views who still respect individual responsibility and accountability. If it continues to go in the direction it presently is headed, which is to attempt at every turn to purge members or question their conservatism, then it's a party that will die over time.

In light of high marks that Legislature watchers are giving you for this session, how do you assess your political future?

I would like to serve in the Senate for a bit longer, and at this point unless there's an opportunity where I believe that I can provide good for the people, then it's my intent to retire and return to the operation of my business.

Would I serve in some other office? I guess that would all depend on the office and whether or not there was a need.

But I'm not someone who serves in a timid fashion. I believe we go down there to strongly represent our constituency, and on occasion when that means you have an opinion that differs from the pack, I think you have to have the courage to offer that up and stand firm on your convictions.