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Texas Legislature adjourns after meltdown in Senate; special session looms

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House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, and his wife, Julie, leave the House chamber after the House adjourned Monday. AP/Harry Cabluck

AUSTIN — The 81st Legislature adjourned Monday night with angry state senators urging Gov. Rick Perry to call a special session to salvage \$2 billion in highway transportation money. The money was left in limbo when the House killed legislation to keep the Texas Department of Transportation and four other state agencies operating.

The dust-up dashed hopes for a smooth conclusion to the 140-day biennial session without the need for a special session to deal with unresolved issues or priorities demanded by the governor.

Earlier, on the first day of the hurricane season, lawmakers came through at Perry's insistence with emergency legislation to replenish a windstorm insurance fund for Gulf Coast residents.

At the center of the dispute was the House's decision to abandon a "safety net" bill that would have granted a two-year continuance for the Transportation Department, the state Department of Insurance and three other agencies. The safety net legislation for the Transportation Department was considered a stop-gap fix after a more comprehensive bill restructuring the agency died in the waning days of the Legislature.

Before adjourning, House members approved a parliamentary patch-up that they said would keep the Transportation Department operating. But senators condemned that action as insufficient, voting 17-11 to

adjourn without voting on it, and denounced the House for killing the transportation bill. That legislation included \$2 billion in transportation bonds to fund highway projects across the state.

Senators called on Perry to convene a special session to reauthorize the Transportation Department and clear the way for using the \$2 billion in highway construction money.

Perry spokeswoman Allison Castle did not directly address the request for a special session, but she disputed the senators' description of the situation, saying the agencies will be able to continue operating like normal despite the tumultuous conclusion of the session.

'A disaster'

"The action by the House is a disaster," said Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan. "Right now, the budget at TxDOT is wrecked and people are going to start losing their jobs" if Perry declines to call a special session.

Senators were told that the agency can continue to operate until September 2010, giving Perry adequate time to call lawmakers back to Austin if he agrees that it's necessary.

Senators expressed outrage that the House abruptly adjourned without passing a resolution that would have permitted the use of the bonds.

"They went sine die [adjourned] after destroying four and a half months of work that passed through this body," said Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay.

In other action, the Senate sent to the governor a \$1.9 billion school funding bill that includes a one-time \$800 pay raise for teachers.

It was the first expansion of public school financing since 1948 that wasn't mandated by a court order, said Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, the Senate Education Committee chairwoman. She described the measure "as one of the finest pieces of legislation this Legislature has done in a very long time."

The House and Senate adjourned Monday evening after days of turbulence that included a bill-killing parliamentary slowdown in the House and a threatened filibuster in the Senate.

"Some days I thought would never end, and some weeks flew by," Speaker Joe Straus said before adjourning the House on a motion from Rep. Charlie Geren, R-Fort Worth.

After a weekend when many bills seemed to zoom through both chambers, things often slowed to a crawl Monday. During long delays between votes, members on the House floor signed "thank you" cards or used their laptops to check news sites or watch funny videos.

Senators did their part to avoid a special session by sending Perry legislation to fund windstorm insurance coverage for Gulf Coast counties. Perry had threatened to call a special session if lawmakers failed to bolster the insurance fund. The bill passed the House earlier.

A 'miracle' comeback

Some of the most emotional moments on the session's last day centered on the return of Rep. Edmund Kuempel, R-Seguin, just weeks after he suffered a heart attack and collapsed in a Capitol elevator. Lawmakers had feared the worst when Geren, Kuempel's close friend, told House members early on that their colleague was in a medical coma.

The chamber erupted in applause and cheers as Geren wheeled Kuempel onto the House floor. "It's good to be here," Kuempel said with a broad smile, right before receiving a kiss on the cheek from Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller.

Many expressed amazement that Kuempel made it back in time for the end of the session. "It's a miracle," said Rep. Leo Berman, R-Tyler, shaking his head in disbelief.

Voter ID battle

Compared to bitterly confrontational sessions of previous years, the 81st Legislature was relatively tame as Straus, a moderate Republican from San Antonio, sought to steer the almost evenly divided House on a bipartisan course after replacing former Speaker Tom Craddick, who was ousted.

But the tranquility dissolved in the closing days as Democrats staged a five-day parliamentary slowdown that successfully killed a voter-identification bill. Hundreds of other bills caught in the crossfire also died.

The voter ID issue, which will likely return in the 2011 session, was easily the most volatile partisan issue in both chambers.

Lingering bitterness from the fight over the voter ID bill was still evident Monday.

"I hope that the people of Texas will be able to look back at this session as the moment when members put their foot down and stopped the House leadership from pushing partisan priorities over the needs of Texas families," said Rep. Marc Veasey, D-Fort Worth.

House Elections Committee Chairman Todd Smith, R-Euless, said, "I think it went marvelously well in that the House functioned as a remarkably civil body until the last few days," referring to the impasse over voter ID legislation.

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