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Perry says he will call lawmakers back to Austin

BY AMAN BATHEJA

abatheja@star-telegram.com

Gov. Rick Perry confirmed Tuesday that he will call a special legislative session, but he declined to provide details on when or what issues will be covered.

"We now are to the point that we can say that there will be a special session," Perry said, speaking to reporters at a meeting at the Capitol with business leaders about energy. "When is still a little bit up in the air."

This will be Perry's eighth special session since he became governor in 2000.

Perry said last week that he might have to call a special session because lawmakers failed to pass key "sunset" bills to continue funding for several state agencies, including the Texas Department of Transportation.

The agencies in question would be shuttered by Sept. 1, 2010, without the legal authority to continue. But it's unclear if the agencies need the issue addressed right away or whether it can wait until next year.

As governor, Perry has the authority to call legislators back to Austin for up to 30 days to cover any issues he wants. Many conservatives hope to see Perry add the voter identification legislation to the session's to-do list.

"When I decide on the date, I'll let you all know what we're going to discuss," Perry said.

Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, who led the unsuccessful charge in the House for a bill allowing counties to hold local-option elections to raise money for transportation projects, said she hopes Perry will put that issue on the agenda. The transportation funding bill was a high priority for many North Texas cities, which want to raise money for highway projects and to expand commuter rail service.

"I am trying to get a meeting with him," Truitt said. "TxDOT has said by the first quarter of 2012, unless we identify new methods of funding, there will be no money for new construction projects, and that's less than three years from now." Perry previously said he was open to a bill that would raise taxes or fees to fund transportation if it was focused on North Texas. By the end of the session, the measure had expanded to allow several other parts of the state to participate.

Local lawmakers agree that Perry needs to call a special session but differ on what topics should be covered:

Rep. Lon Burnam, D-Fort Worth: If the special session is to address critical issues such as agency sunset measures, "the sooner the better," he said. "But if this is for his right-wing ideological agenda, then he's using state money for his campaign purposes and that's wrong."

Rep. Charlie Geren, R-Fort Worth: "I'm guessing he's going to have to bring up the TxDOT and I'll be surprised if he'll bring up anything else other than that. Maybe he'll bring up TDI [Texas Department of Insurance] . My job is just to be there whenever he calls us back." . . . too.

Rep. Phil King, R-Weatherford: "My preference would be that we just deal with the sunset issues and the \$2 billion of bond funding for TxDOT. The other item I hope we can do: voter ID, to make sure we have integrity in the next election cycle."

Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound: "Sunset scheduling is by far the most important consideration. The session concluded without passing the sunset bills for the Texas Department of Transportation and Insurance, among others. Transportation issues are critical to our continued growth, and I am happy to see the governor call an immediate special session to conclude our business in that area as well as the others left unfinished."

Rep. Marc Veasey, D-Fort Worth: "The Sunset Commission staff is recommending that we need to do it soon," he said. "Let's do it now, rather than later on down the road. Having it after the primary would look like it's being timed and held for political reasons."

Veasey said he hopes the session will be devoted just to the issues involving those state agencies now in limbo. "It would be absolutely horrible, bad timing, if we were to go back and do something as divisive as the voter suppression bill."

Staff writer Anna M. Tinsley contributed to this report, which includes material from The Associated Press.

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Gov. Rick Perry,
discussing plans for special legislative session

AMAN BATHEJA, 817-390-7695