

Dewhurst engineers midterm Senate shakeup

Overhaul puts new leaders on important committees, sparks speculation about reasons for shuffle.



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Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst shuffled top posts in 8 committees.

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Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst on Wednesday shuffled the leadership of eight Senate committees in a major overhaul that could shift the politics of the next legislative session and could portend an upcoming vacancy.

The changes, sparked at least in part by one chairman's retirement earlier this year, are the most significant realignment of upper chamber committees in years. The unusual midterm lineup change means that several panels with significant clout in the next session have new leaders — some with a different political bent than the previous, though all are Republicans.

"I would say it's the biggest shuffling in quite a while. I can't recall a larger one between sessions like this," said Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, the Senate's longest serving member. He was first elected to the Senate in 1983.

Announcement of the changes triggered immediate speculation at the Capitol about what it all meant: whether some senators were getting promoted or busted and what the shifts would mean for a January legislative session that is widely expected to be rancorous because the state faces a multibillion-dollar budget shortfall and must tackle the politically ticklish issue of redrawing legislative and congressional district boundaries in the wake of the U.S. census.

At the top of the list for speculation: why Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, lost his chairmanship of the Jurisprudence Committee and became the chairman of a new and more obscure Select Committee on Veterans Health . Wentworth represents part of southern Travis County and Hays County.

Wentworth, who joined the Senate in 1993 and who last session publicly challenged Dewhurst several times for not calling one of his bills up for a vote, has been rumored for

weeks to be considering resigning to take a job with the Texas A&M University System, though he has not commented on his future.

Earlier this year he applied to be chancellor of the Texas State University System but was not hired.

Wentworth could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Two other senators said privately that they suspect he is considering leaving his legislative seat.

Among the new assignments, Sen. Tommy Williams, a straight-spoken conservative Republican from The Woodlands , will replace Sen. John Carona, a more moderate Dallas Republican, as chairman of the powerful Transportation and Homeland Security Committee .

Carona in recent years has been one of the Texas Department of Transportation's harshest critics, angering some supporters of the agency and at times even disagreeing with fellow Republican Gov. Rick Perry.

But senators said privately that Williams, who spent the 2007 session on the committee before dropping off in the 2009 session, may be just as tough in advocating reforms, if not doing it so publicly.

Carona began his term as chairman with a bang, calling publicly in January 2007 for Perry to replace the late Ric Williamson as chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission. Then a few weeks later, he crashed a House Transportation Committee meeting to take on Williamson personally, chiding him for failing to return his calls.

By session's end, however, Carona was defending TxDOT and the commission against what had become a pitchfork-wielding Legislature eager to strip the agency of its considerable powers.

Williams authored the showcase transportation bill of the 2007 session that stripped TxDOT of its ability to reach long-term contracts with private companies to build and operate toll roads.

In other changes, Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay , who had been chairman of the Business and Commerce Committee, will become chairman of the Natural Resources Committee that was formerly headed by Sen. Kip Averitt, R-Waco . Averitt resigned earlier this year for health reasons.

Cyrus Reed, conservation director of the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club, said Fraser, who served on Natural Resources last session, is open-minded on environmental issues.

"He is a conservative and, generally, conservatives believe less government is better," Reed said. "But he sees that sometimes the market doesn't work."

Fraser takes over a committee that handles major water-related projects, such as pipelines and reservoirs, and air quality issues, like the construction of wind farms and an ongoing fracas between state and federal regulators about Texas' way of permitting pollution by power plants and chemical and manufacturing facilities.

Fraser said he plans to go to Washington to meet with federal officials to tell them they should not shut down Texas' permitting program.

Officials with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have criticized Texas' program as too lax.

"I think the EPA did a knee-jerk reaction," Fraser said. "We need to show them the program we have in place can be a good model, not only environmentally, but also for job growth."

Dewhurst and Fraser said they want to develop a state energy plan that examines the state's generation mix and puts more emphasis on natural gas and other domestic sources of power.

In other committee changes:

- Carona becomes chairman of the Business and Commerce Committee, previously chaired by Fraser.
- Sen. Mike Jackson, R-La Porte , who had been chairman of the Nominations Committee, takes over the helm of the Economic Development Committee.

Jackson is replaced as Nominations chairman by Sen. Robert Deuell, R-Greenville , who previously had no chairmanship.

- Sen. Kevin Eltife, R-Tyler , replaces Williams as chairman of the Administration Committee, the panel that manages the Senate's business affairs and rules.
- Sen. Chris Harris, R-Arlington , moves from the chairmanship of the Economic Development Committee to head the Jurisprudence Committee, which has been chaired by Wentworth.
- Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, remains as vice chairman of the Transportation and Homeland Security Committee and is assigned to the powerful Higher Education Committee — an important position because his district includes the University of Texas at Austin.

"I've wanted to be on Higher Ed since I came into the Senate," Watson said.

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