

Texas sunset panel votes to disband Transportation Commission

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The Texas Sunset Advisory Commission voted this afternoon to abolish the Texas Transportation Commission and replace it with a single commissioner of transportation.

The new post would be Cabinet-like, supporters on the sunset panel said, and likely would be an appointment made by the governor -- just as the five Transportation Commission appointments are now.

The 7-5 vote reflected a sharp split between House and Senate members. All five House members voted for the change, joined by two at-large members, the only non-lawmakers on the panel. All five Senate members vote against it.

The two North Texas lawmakers on the advisory panel are both members of the House, and supported the change: Rep. Linda Harper-Brown, R-Irving, and Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas.

The proposed change becomes part of a much larger sunset bill involving the Texas Department of Transportation. The full House and Senate would have to approve the measure for it to take effect.

Two years ago, the sunset commission also split along House and Senate lines in considering the fate of the Transportation Commission. Then, however, the House members who favored a change were pushing for a greatly expanded commission or a single elected commissioner. Neither of those proposals was part of today's discussion Wednesday.

Still, the history provides some perspective: Once the proposal reached the House floor in 2009, members there debated some 200 amendments, and ended up calling for a 15-person commission composed of one elected member and 14 appointees.

Sen. Glenn Hegar, R-Katy, the sunset panel's chairman, remarked on the oddity of the House members' carrying today's vote by backing the single-commissioner idea, something he supported two years ago. He urged them not to let the bill mutate into something unrecognizable on the House floor.

Hegar said he believes that since 2009, TxDOT has recovered much of the trust it had lost with the public and with lawmakers. "Are we where want to be? No." But the agency has made great strides, he said.

Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, a former Transportation Commission member, tried to persuade his colleagues to reduce the five-member commission to three members, the number it had when he served on it. His motion died for lack of a second.

Harper-Brown provided the second to the motion for a single commissioner -- though she added that she'd prefer to see the commissioner elected rather than appointed. The motion was made by Rep. Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, the sunset panel's vice chairman, who said the switch to a single commissioner would make the governor more accountable for what the department does. "I see this as being almost Cabinet-level like appointment. A single person would be accountable, and the governor would be accountable statewide for this appointment," he said.

He also included in his motion a provision that would prevent a commissioner from continuing to serve beyond his or her term without approval by the Senate.