

House to take up Senate water bill

Legislature: Move ends standoff between Dewhurst, Craddick

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AUSTIN – The House will take up a long-awaited Senate water bill as early as this week, ending an apparent standoff between Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and Speaker Tom Craddick over the contentious legislation.

"They've spoken, and both parties agree it can be worked out," said Rep. Robert Puente, the San Antonio Democrat who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee.

Mr. Craddick "told me this morning we'd see what we could do about getting Senate Bill 3 passed," Mr. Dewhurst said.

The Senate bill – which balances conservation with economic development and ecological needs – was at risk of dying after Mr. Craddick said its official designation of more than a dozen future reservoir sites would be too controversial.

And Mr. Dewhurst had little interest in considering House conservation and water flow bills piecemeal, when the complete Senate bill he championed was sitting outside the House door.

Dallas officials feared the hold-up could undermine their future reservoirs, allowing environmental groups and federal agencies to chip away at years of regional water planning.

Lawmakers in the House Natural Resources Committee have already tweaked the bill to remove Dallas' two most important future reservoirs – Marvin Nichols and Fastrill – from the designation list. And they've tacked on royalty payments to landowners at future lake sites that officials say will make building them prohibitively expensive. Because the bill is the only remaining broad water legislation, Mr. Puente said, "Every single member is going to want an amendment or two."

Dallas representatives say once the bill is on the floor – which could be anytime between now and Tuesday – they will seek to amend it to put future North Texas reservoirs back on the list. And Mr. Puente said Mr. Craddick told him he's willing to let debate run its course.

The reservoir element is key to the bill's supporters in water-flush Dallas. Though North Texas officials have questioned the "instream flows" provision, which would equalize water levels across the state, they've accepted it because of the future reservoir designation. And they think designating reservoirs will prevent environmental groups or the federal government from laying claim to the land.

But reservoir designation has drawn the ire of environmentalists, loggers and landowners afraid of being flooded to build new lakes. Mr. Dewhurst has compared his struggles with this bill to a similar water planning measure he endorsed in the 2005 session. That legislation passed the Senate and was never brought up for a vote in the House.

Tuesday's announcement "is great news – it's something that the state has got to get started on sooner rather than later," said Larry Casto, Dallas' chief lobbyist. "We're approaching the end of the session. Time is getting short for bills to start moving."