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Senators scuffle over transportation board

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Capital News Service -- Transportation tension mounted last week as senators discussed and approved a bill that would let the General Assembly elect 11 of the 17 members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

Republicans hailed the bill as a much-needed step in holding transportation officials accountable to the Legislature, but Sen. R. Edward Houck, D-Spotsylvania, said the move would only further politicize the process.

Sen. Martin E. Williams, R-Newport News, proposed the bill and acknowledged its tough road ahead. Williams expressed his intentions to battle Gov. Timothy M. Kaine on the issue, saying he would willingly follow in the footsteps of Sen. Frank W. Wagner, R-Virginia Beach, who was the only senator to have a bill vetoed by Gov. Mark Warner last session.

"My good friend, the junior senator from Virginia Beach, loves to brag that his bill last year was the only bill to be vetoed by the governor – the only Senate bill," Williams said. "I think I'm going to send maybe the first one up this year."

Since lawmakers should expect to be held responsible for transportation developments, Williams argued, they should have some say in who sits on the board, which oversees the Virginia Department of Transportation and decides on the funding and location of road projects.

"We're the ones that are looked to raise the funds for them; we're the ones that your neighbors look to – they don't call the governor's office, they call us – look to when the potholes aren't filled and the traffic backs up," Williams said.

Houck took the floor next to say such an election process would effectively shut out Democrats, who are outnumbered by Republicans in the General Assembly. Of the 40 senators, 23 are Republicans and 17 are Democrats.

"Certainly as one of the members of the minority party here in the Senate, I take very little comfort that if the expectation is we're going to elect these commission members in the same process that we do judges,

quite frankly I'm sort of shut out of that process," Houck said. "I don't even have a seat at the table, much less part of the discussion."

He said the Commonwealth Transportation Board shouldn't be blamed for the state's transportation woes. The main problem has been the Legislature's "unwillingness to address the financing of a transportation system," Houck said.

But Sen. Charles R. Hawkins, R-Chatham, helped seal the bill's passage as he declared it an enhancement of the lawmakers' role in transportation.

"The Legislature needs to have a voice in the process. We need to be a partner in this," Hawkins said. "If we're asking these people to make decisions on how they spend multi-billions of dollars for the benefit of our constituencies, we need to be at the table."

The bill passed the Senate on a 23-16 vote, split along party lines, and will now head to the House for consideration. Should the bill pass the House and be approved by the governor, the General Assembly would elect 11 of the 17 members of the board with a vote by congressional districts.

Currently, the Commonwealth Transportation Board consists of the state's secretary of transportation, the commonwealth transportation commissioner, the director of the Department of Rail and Public Transportation, and 14 citizen members. Board members are appointed by the governor, subject to confirmation by the General Assembly, and serve four-year terms. The secretary of transportation chairs the board.

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