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Senate panel rejects longer meth sentences

By Pat Kane, Capital News Service
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RICHMOND -- The Senate Courts Committee has killed a bill to make the sentencing guidelines for methamphetamine dealers the same as the sentencing guidelines for cocaine dealers.

The committee last week voted 10-5 to shelve Senate Bill 335, which would compel judges to give those caught with quantities of methamphetamine the same extended jail sentences cocaine dealers receive.

"It is becoming the drug of choice in rural Virginia, and I think it is going to become the drug of choice in other parts of Virginia," said the bill's patron, Sen. Mark Obenshain, R-Harrisonburg.

"I think we have an opportunity to address this problem before it becomes a statewide problem."

Obenshain said his bill was dead in the Senate. However, fellow Republican Delegate C. Todd Gilbert has offered a similar proposal -- House Bill 785 -- in his chamber. Obenshain said he would work with Gilbert to pass the House version.

Gilbert, of Woodstock, is an active prosecutor and said he was disappointed when the bill died in the Senate.

"I feel like increasing the sentences on serious offenders -- which is what we're talking about here -- is the quickest way to make a dent in the methamphetamine epidemic that is growing across the commonwealth," Gilbert said.

He said senators may have worried about the costs of the longer spells in jail.

"It's a valid concern; it's going to cost money to incarcerate offenders for longer periods of time. But I feel like that's a valuable investment in public safety," Gilbert said.

If the bill passes the House, it will land back in the Senate Courts Committee after crossover, the time when bills are switched between the chambers. Gilbert said he hopes for "another shot at convincing the Senate to do the right thing."

Gilbert has introduced a second bill to restrict over-the-counter sales of drugs containing

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pseudoephedrine, a component for making methamphetamine.

"This drug is so dangerous that to freely allow the sale of its main ingredient on the open market is going to be impossible," he said.

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