Lawmakers clash over water legislation

Republicans want infrastructure bond; Dems say governance must come first

By WES SANDER

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SACRAMENTO -- While they agreed on a need for bipartisan action, California lawmakers sparred Tuesday, Aug. 18, over the immediate need for a water-infrastructure bond in a package of bills currently at the top of the legislature's agenda.

In the first of several hearings addressing the bills, Democrats and Republicans struck a mostly civil tone. But Republicans expressed frustration, sometimes heatedly, over whether the bills should include a bond to pay for infrastructure upgrades to the state's decades-old conveyance system.

Tuesday's informational hearing focused on five bills that address challenges surrounding the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The bills address agricultural and urban water efficiency and creation of a management plan and governance structure for the Delta.

A bicameral conference committee will consider the package before the year's legislative session ends on Sept. 11. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has said he wants a comprehensive bill package approved by year's end, but criticized the current effort as incomplete.

While Republican committee members decried the lack of a bond provision, the bills' Democratic authors contended that governance is the Delta's most pressing concern.

"Governing agencies in the Delta -- and there's more than 200 of them with some role or another -- have failed to resolve this crisis, in part because no one is in charge," said Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, who chairs the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife. "And rather than avoiding or leading us out of the crisis, some of them have actually made matters worse. They've fought over the Delta in interagency bureaucratic battles, in court and in the legislature.

"Right now there's no public forum where environmental groups and other interests can bring their concerns," Huffman said. "Right now there is no entity charged with balancing the conflicting goals in the Delta and the needs of Delta communities."

Senate Republican leader Dennis Hollingsworth, R-Murrieta, criticized the bills' focus on governance.

"This (legislation) is trying to take one aspect of (water management) and push that completely forward, to the detriment of the entire rest of California's interest in this area," Hollingsworth said. "Quite frankly I'm disappointed that we've spent so many months and only gotten to this point."

In a letter sent Monday, Aug. 17, to legislative leaders, Schwarzenegger vowed to veto any bill package lacking an infrastructure bond.

"I cannot sign a comprehensive water package if it fails to include a water infrastructure bond that expands our water storage capacity -- both surface storage and groundwater," Schwarzenegger said in the letter. "I believe we could resolve any remaining differences in an hour, and I will not sign a water bill without the infrastructure necessary to improve supply reliability."

Sen. Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto, vice chair of the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee, expressed frustration over missed chances at approving a water bond in recent years.

"All we continue to do is talk, and meet, and submit bills, and argue over them and get absolutely nowhere," Cogdill said. "And the problem isn't going away, it's not on hold. And today, as we speak, there are people in this state who are suffering because of our inefficient and inadequate water system."

Huffman said Democratic leadership had decided that laying out a new governance structure is a necessary first step.

"I think everybody has been clear from the beginning that there is an investment need that needs to be coupled eventually with these policy decisions," he said. "But I think we're here today to talk about the policy piece, and I think those issues can move together on a complementary schedule."

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