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Torlakson tapped for top policy post

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen

President Pro Tem Don Perata has combined the Senate's housing and transportation committees and appointed state Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, its chairman.

The move is an about-face on both political and policy fronts.

Leaders typically reward loyal supporters with committee chairmanships. But Torlakson endorsed Perata's challenger, Martha Escutia, D-Norwalk, in a bitter and close fight earlier this year for the Senate's top post.

"Tom and Sen. Perata have had some good conversations, and they both felt it was time to move on," said Torlakson spokesman Robert Oakes. Torlakson is in China with several other legislators. "Tom has long made it clear that this is a policy area of his."

Perata's choice of Torlakson also meshes with his recent moves to soothe ruffled political feathers and avert dissent in the flock.

Perata, D-Alameda, has appointed Escutia chairwoman of the Energy, Utilities and Communications Committee. And he selected another contender, Sen. Sheila Kuehl, D-Los Angeles, to head the Natural Resources and Water Committee.

As chairman over two major policy arenas, Torlakson will wield considerable control over what bills make it through the committee and onto the Senate floor.

He will also play a key role in the determination of who pays the overruns on the half-built new Bay Bridge. Torlakson replaces Sen. Kevin Murray, D-Los Angeles, who said toll payers, not the state, should bear the costs.

On the policy side, state politicians traditionally view housing and transportation as separate subjects and have been loath, either directly or indirectly, to tell cities and counties how to grow.

The merger sends a strong signal that state lawmakers intend to debate policy links between land-use and transportation decisions, most likely with a combination of carrots and sticks.

The move also dovetails with the state Business, Transportation and Housing Secretary Sunne Wright McPeak's agenda.

As secretary and as a former Bay Area Council chief, McPeak has advocated long and loud for smart growth, a movement to build shops, homes and jobs more compactly and near transit.

"It's a major policy statement," said Eric Hailey, head of the Riverside County Transportation Authority and president of the California Self Help Counties Coalition, which lobbies for transportation sales taxes. "I think it reinforces the intertwined policy concerns of Secretary McPeak, and this clearly, just by its structure of the committee and its jurisdiction, will ensure a debate that relates to housing and transportation."

McPeak and Torlakson have a long-established relationship. Both served as Contra Costa County supervisors, and the pair have appeared jointly to talk about the need for greater ties between housing and transportation.

With no opposition, Torlakson won re-election earlier this month to a second four-year term. He previously served two terms in the Assembly.

Bay Area leaders welcomed both the appointment and the merger.

"I think it's a great idea to merge the two, and I think it's great that Tom's been chosen because he's been talking about this for years," said Mark DeSaulnier, a Contra Costa County supervisor and member of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, a regional planning body. "This is the way you have to go if you want to protect open space, if you want to be more efficient and stop two-hour commutes for people."

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