



Divided Virginia Senate comes to halt

By: [Steve Contorno](#) | 01/24/12 8:10 PM

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A game of political chicken between Senate Democrats and Republicans threatened to bring the Virginia General Assembly to a standstill Tuesday, foreshadowing future gridlock when the discussion shifts to funding roads and education.

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The finger pointing began when Senate Republicans pushed for a vote on legislation to elect 49 local judges, a traditionally routine procedure that met little resistance in the committee phase. But Democrats insisted they were not prepared to approve two new judges -- former Dels. Clifford Athey Jr., of Warren, a Republican, and Clarence Phillips of Dickerson, a Democrat -- and asked to instead just OK the 47 incumbents.

Republicans, who control an evenly divided Senate in which Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling, a Republican, holds the tie-breaking vote, initially refused. But Bolling isn't allowed to vote on judgeships, so the two sides remained in a stalemate for hours, blocking any other business from being taken up by the Senate until the matter was resolved.

At one point, both parties threatened to recess for three days. Republicans broke the stalemate by delaying the vote on the judges until Thursday, though not before Senate Majority Leader Tommy Norment, R-James City, accused Democrats of picking a fight over "bruised feelings and political egos."

Senate Minority Leader Dick Saslaw, D-Fairfax, countered the GOP was "willing to shut the entire General Assembly down" just to flex its new power in Richmond.

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Tuesday's exchange tested the political mettle of the two parties as they prepare for a more consequential showdown over the budget, another issue on which Bolling is not allowed to cast tie-breaking votes.

Democrats stand willing to fight Gov. Bob McDonnell's plan to shift a portion of the sales tax away from schools to pay for roads, and hope to restore other cuts to K-12 education in the two-year budget. Republican lawmakers have scoffed at Democratic proposals to increase the gas tax to fund transportation.

Sen. Jill Holtzman Vogel, R-Winchester, warned that Tuesday's impasse will leave open a judge's seat

in her Northern Virginia district, causing court delays.

Still, neither side showed any immediate signs of backing down in the first of what promises to be a series of such showdowns.

"I'm not easily disappointed," Norment said, "although I have been today."

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