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Insurgents meet to plot overthrow of House speaker

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At least 11 GOP House members are meeting at an undisclosed location late Friday afternoon, and they're promising to produce a consensus speaker candidate who will lead the badly divided chamber when the

By the Associated Press

Published: Friday, January 2, 2009 1:23 PM CST



Speaker Tom Craddick announces Monday afternoon that Midland will be the site for a Satellite Mary Crowley Cancer Research Center. Photo by Reid Merritt 10/27/08

AUSTIN (AP) — It's showdown time in Austin, where renegade Republicans are plotting the overthrow of long-serving House Speaker Tom Craddick, one of the most powerful leaders in state government.

At least 11 GOP House members are meeting at an undisclosed location late Friday afternoon, and they're promising to produce a consensus speaker candidate who will lead the badly divided chamber when the 81st session of the Texas Legislature convenes Jan 13.

Rep. Tommy Merritt, R-Longview, one of the insurgents participating in the meeting, said he's willing to give up his own candidacy for speaker if it means ending Craddick's controversial rule.

"It's a cause greater than one's self. We're going to stop the era of absolute authority," Merritt said. "We will elect a Republican speaker with a Republican majority."

Craddick, the longest serving Republican in state elective office, won't go down without a fight. He plans to hold his own meeting Sunday, and his supporters say he has far more votes than any single candidate. But his admission that he lacks a majority of the 150-member body has sewn doubt that Craddick will remain in his powerful post.

“Members are in a position for the first time in memory where some of them feel it’s less dangerous to vote for the sitting speaker than vote the way they’ve been going,” said Ross Ramsey, editor of the political newsletter Texas Weekly. “For a lot of them, the uncertainty is just unbearable.”

The group meeting to plot the speaker’s demise is known informally as the ABCs — Anybody But Craddick. Rep. Charlie Geren, R-Fort Worth, one of the main coup plotters, promises that “there will be one candidate” by the time the gathering breaks up Friday night. At least 64 Democrats are also vowing to oppose Craddick “under any circumstances.”

First elected to his West Texas House seat in 1968, Craddick became speaker in 2003, when Republicans had an 88-62 majority. Today, six years later, it has dwindled to 76-74, a bare two-seat margin. More recently, Republicans who once were counted among Craddick’s top GOP supporters have publicly broken from the longtime speaker and are calling for new leadership.

So far eight Republicans, including Craddick, have filed the paperwork necessary to run for speaker, and even more could join the race before the saga ends. Rep. John Smithee, R-Amarillo, the speaker’s hand-picked chairman of the House Insurance Committee, said he is thinking about running or getting behind another candidate in order to restore “peace and harmony” in the badly divided chamber.

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