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## Lawmakers challenge Forensic Science Commission chairman's priorities

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By **CHRISTY HOPPE** / The Dallas Morning News  
[choppe@dallasnews.com](mailto:choppe@dallasnews.com)

AUSTIN – State lawmakers suggested Wednesday that the prosecutor Gov. [Rick Perry](#) placed in charge of the Texas Forensic Science Commission is doing more to impede cases than investigate them.

The chairman, Williamson County District Attorney [John Bradley](#), has concentrated on clarifying the forensic commission's policies and procedures and putting them into a manual rather than holding hearings on a death-penalty case that has raised questions about arson convictions statewide, members of the House Public Safety Committee charged.

The lawmakers wanted to hear about changes that Bradley has attempted to institute – including asking his fellow commissioners to destroy most of their e-mails after a day and to not speak with the media. He also has sought to discontinue the commission's practice of allowing members from the public to address them during their meetings, his colleagues said.

Such directives "really undermine public confidence. That's what we're asking about," said Rep. Stephen Frost, D-Atlanta.

In October, Perry abruptly replaced three members of the nine-person forensics commission just as it was about to hear testimony from a fire expert in the arson case of Cameron Todd Willingham, who was executed in 2004.

Craig Beyler, a nationally recognized arson expert, is among a half-dozen prominent fire authorities who have questioned evidence in the case. Willingham was convicted of starting a Corsicana house fire that killed his two children. The experts' examinations found the fire investigation was fraught with what they called wives' tales and junk science.

Committee chairman Tommy Merritt, R-Longview, told two commission members who testified that taking six months to write a manual while not advancing in their investigations bothered him.

"I'm not very happy with what you're telling me," Merritt said. "Are we here to serve the public or are we here to throw up roadblocks to prevent you from doing your job? It appears to me we're throwing up roadblocks."

He also took Bradley to task for failing to appear for the hearing.

Bradley, contacted after the meeting, said he received a letter less than a week ago asking him to appear at a time when he was already committed to speak at a county leadership conference.

He pointed out that he has already testified before two other legislative committees, including one at which Merritt asked him questions.

And he said he has worked hard to create written standards and policies that will be clear to the forensic labs being held accountable.

"Those people have a right to understand what the written standards, policies and procedures should be," Bradley said.

He added: "I haven't been around long enough to be much of a roadblock."

Sarah Kerrigan, a forensic scientist and member of the commission, said the other members have been "uncomfortable" with some of Bradley's ideas, but they are trying to work together and give his ideas a chance.