

MEMBER Texas Press Association

THE EAGLE LAKE HEADLIGHT
(USPS 653-760)
P.O. Box 67—220 East Main—(409) 234-5521
CITY OF EAGLE LAKE, TEXAS 77434-0067
Published Weekly—Every Thursday
ADVERTISING AND NEWS DEADLINE:
5 P.M. MONDAY

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Subscription Rates (to 4/1/86):
Colorado County, Lissie, East Bernard, Glen Flores and
Payette, Leavine, Austin and other Wharton County
residents \$14.17
Other Texas Residents \$15.77
Outside of Texas \$16.50
*These rates include tax

Single Copy Price: 35-Cents
(33-CENTS PLUS 2-cents tax)
Second class postage paid at Eagle Lake, Tx.
Address Corrections should be sent to P.O.
Box 67, Eagle Lake, Texas 77434-0067

Gov. White considering temporary sales tax hike

Some Texas House members think Gov. Mark White's tax plan is dead in the water right now. White doesn't think so.

Last week, the governor reversed himself and decided to support what he considers a compromise position: an \$810 million sales tax hike on a temporary basis. Now he's squarely between the two other powers: Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby wants a \$2.8 billion tax hike while Speaker Gib Lewis wants no new taxes.

Lewis was a little surprised, since a work earlier White was his ally in the no new tax position, but he stood firm believing the House hasn't the votes to pass a tax bill.

Right now, the biggest hurdle White must leap is State Rep. Stan Schlueter, a conservative Democrat who chairs the Ways and Means Committee where the tax bill must originate.

Schlueter says, "No way," and he's got a list of Republicans on the committee to back him up.

White hopeful
Still, White remains hopeful. He's counting on the Senate and Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby to pressure the House, but how?

At this point, the remaining valid issue is budget cuts. One scenario has the Senate refusing to cut as deep as the House unless the House sends over a tax bill.

Bold action indeed for senators who face reelection in less than three months.

Another scene has White using special sessions to keep legislators in Austin until a tax bill is passed. But that would prevent his fellow

Capitol Highlights



Democrats from campaigning back home.

A new issue?

Are there new issues he could inject into the special call to entice House members to vote for a tax hike? Hard to do with political careers at stake.

But to return to the source, the Ways and Means Committee won't let a tax bill reach the House floor without the support of Speaker Lewis and he now lives in a Republican district, opposed by a well-backed Democrat. A tax bill could spell defeat for Lewis.

Political survival
While Republican voters across the state might applaud the sacrifice, Lewis' loss could upset the delicate

the House vote on a tax hike under certain conditions.

For one thing, almost everyone agrees privately that a tax hike is needed, either now or next session.

Now or later?
So Republicans who are gambling that former Gov. Bill Clements will defeat White in November are asking themselves whether it's better to have a tax hike under White or in nine months under their own governor?

Matter of fact, by letting a tax hike out now, they might be softening up White for an easier defeat.

There are two pitfalls in that route.

One, some people actually consider a tax hike to be good electoral politics. Even though it goes against common wisdom, the case can be made that grateful tax recipients vote for pro-tax candidates.

White is behind in the polls now, and the GOP may not want to chance the oddball effect which would revitalize his momentum. Besides, by stifling his tax bill, they can accentuate his lack of leadership.

Two, a tax hike means they might be sacrificing long-time ally, Speaker Gib Lewis. Time has caught up with the Fort Worth Democrat and he now lives in a Republican district, opposed by a well-backed Democrat. A tax bill could spell defeat for Lewis.

Political survival
While Republican voters across the state might applaud the sacrifice, Lewis' loss could upset the delicate

alliance in the House which has truly benefited the GOP.

Certainly, it would hasten polarization and the setting up of party caucuses, like in Congress. The GOP could emerge even more of a minority party in influence.

The above considerations fall under the category of political survival, which is secondary to survival of state government.

While one opes for all legislators

to be statement all the time, it's more realistic that each one does

what he or she can for his political survival. How readily they pass beyond that point is a private happening in the voters, and rarely seen by the voters.

The late death of the House, Bill Healy, "The Prince of Paducah," once advised fellow members that the day comes for each of them when they walk out the chamber door for the last time. Soon, few people would

remember their names, and the important thing was for them to remember their own political acts without private shame.

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Prairie Edge Museum Notes

By Elizabeth Boothe

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