



THE EAGLE LAKE HEADLIGHT

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State Senate approves \$83.3 billion budget

The state Senate approved a \$83.3 billion state budget last week that would increase funding for public schools, prisons and social services programs.

But the 1998-99 budget does not include pay raises for state employees and education programs such as Gov. George W. Bush's \$470 million reading initiative and a \$1 billion back-to-basics program sought by university officials to increase the number of graduates.

"Higher education pay raises have been forced to take a back seat to public education and prisons," said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Bill Ratliff, R-Mount Pleasant.

Also not included in the budget, which is now up for consideration by a House and Senate conference committee, is the \$1 billion surplus from the 1996-97 budget that Gov. Bush has proposed using for school property tax relief.

"The budget keeps the scales balanced between the state's most critical services and the taxpayer's demand for leaner government," said Lt. Gov. Bob Bullock, who presides over the Senate.

The proposed budget would increase general tax revenue for public schools by 7.7%, prisons by 8% and social services funding by 3%.

Ratliff said general revenues of about \$600 million in the proposed budget would be available to spread across more than \$5 billion worth of wish-list items compiled by state legislators.

Tax Them All, Bush Says

Last week, the House Select Committee on Revenue and Public Education Funding continued in its quest to raise \$5.7 billion to cut property taxes by killing sales tax exemptions and expanding the franchise to include partnerships.

Gov. Bush said that to help pay for property tax relief, he supports taxing all types of business, including partnerships.

State Capitol Highlights

By Lyndell Williams
and Ed Sterling
Texas Press Association

"This plan out to make sure there are no loopholes for people who are in the business world. I support including all forms of business entities in this plan," he said.

The committee heard testimony from Texans who belong to such partnerships.

Under Texas law, noncorporate companies such as limited and general partnerships are not subject to the state business franchise tax. The franchise tax is assessed on business capital or income, whichever is higher.

Both the governor and Rep. Paul Sadler, D-Henderson, chairman of the select committee, said they want to find a way to differentiate between active and passive income partnerships.

Bush and Sadler said they support taxing active business income but not business income from passive investments.

Primary Election Shift

Texas would be removed from the Super Tuesday presidential primaries under a bill approved by the House Elections Committee last week.

Under the measure by Rep. Sherri Greenberg, D-Austin, all primary contests in the state would be moved from March to the first Saturday in May, beginning in the year 2000.

Greenberg's bill was supported by Democratic and Republican officials, the League of Women Voters, the Texas AFL-CIO and the government watchdog group Common Cause-Texas.

Before 1988, Texas held presidential primaries in May. The state Legislature moved the primaries so Texas would join other Southern states in the

March 1988 Super Tuesday primary. Since then, many non-Southern states have moved up their primaries and in doing so watering down any influence Texas might have gained by joining the Super Tuesday states.

Greenberg said she hadn't found anyone who thinks Super Tuesday has given Texas more clout. "We have a primary season that is very long and very expensive. It makes it difficult on the voters and difficult on the people trying to get into political life," she said.

House Backs 'Healthy Kids'

The House last week approved the creation of the Texas Healthy Kids Corp., a public-private partnership which would encourage insurance companies to provide basic health-care coverage for Texas' 1.3 million uninsured children.

According to a fiscal analysis, the corporation could save the state about \$200,000 in the upcoming state budget and \$30 million by the end of 2002.

Under the bill by Rep. Hugo Berlanga, D-Corpus Christi, the corporation's board would choose:

- Which children would be eligible to receive health care based on their parents' income and other factors;
- Which insurers would participate; and
- What treatment would be covered.

Senate Passes Phone Slam Bill

The Senate approved legislation that would stop "slamming" the practice in which a long distance carrier takes over a customer's phone service without consent.

"They have done that to literally millions of people," said Sen. Gonzales Barrientos, D-Austin, author of the bill.

The measure, co-sponsored by Sen. David Sibley, R-Waco, would require a telephone company to have to be able to verify that it has a customer's permission when it takes over their long distance service.

TEXAS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES UPDATE

From the office of District 25 State Representative Robert L. "Robby" Cook III

APPROPRIATIONS BILL

The general appropriations bill, House Bill 1, for the fiscal 1998-99 biennium passed the Texas House of Representatives March 19.

The proposed state budget of \$83.3 billion is an increase of 3.2% over the current budget.

Fifty-one point five billion of the funding will come from general revenue-related funds with an additional \$24.1 billion from federal funds and \$7.7 billion from other funds.

This rate of growth, however, does not factor in population, economy and inflation growth rates and should not be compared strictly with the current budget.

House Bill 1 will reduce several budget items.

This reduction is due to program savings such as \$66.5 million in sav-

ing from declining welfare caseloads and the substitution of the new federal welfare block grant and other federal funds to replace \$114.9 million in general revenue spending.

Education, which is the largest function area in the state's budget, accounts for 60% of all revenue spending. The budget would generally fund higher education at 1996-97 levels, and provide additional funding for enrollment growth at two-year institutions and certain health related institutions.

Higher education enrollment has increased by 8%, while community college enrollment has grown 36.5% between 1988 and 1997.

The appropriations bill also includes a \$2 per semester hour tuition increase for 1998 and 1999. Despite this, tuition and fees at most public institutions in Texas are among the lowest in the nation.

Total state spending is concentrated in education and health and human services, which account for 43.7% and 30.7%, respectively, of the state budget. Business and economic development functions (12.1%) and public safety and criminal justice functions (8.1%) rank distant third and fourth places.

All other state functions combined represent less than 6% of total state expenditures.

Discussions over state employee

pay raises could become reality through a "place-holding" provision for across-the-board salary increases. No amount is specified, but the Senate Finance Committee is considering an increase in pay by at least \$100 per month. Merit raises may continue to be granted by agency administrators under certain conditions.

The Lottery Commission Administrative Appropriation would be increased by \$51.5 million due to forecasted growth in lottery receipts. Five hundred and twenty-three million would be appropriated for administrative expenses. The advertising appropriations reflects about an \$8 million decrease from amounts budgeted for 1996-97.

The bill would also require the Lottery Commission to transfer \$375,000 annually to the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse to pay for operation of the state gambling hotline.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

State officials scrambled to meet the deadline for filing bills with statewide implications as the 75th Legislative Session completed its first 60 days on March 14.

Currently 5,585 bills are being considered by the Texas Legislature during the regular session which ends on June 2.

Representative Robert L. "Robby" Cook, who represents Bastrop, Colorado, Fayette and Wharton Counties, has authored or co-authored eight bills during his freshman term in the Texas House of Representatives:

House Bill 706 would grant the Bastrop County Water Control and Improvement District No. 2 the powers and duties of a road district.

House Bill 993 co-authored by Cook and Representative L.P. "Pete" Patterson (who chairs the House Agriculture and Livestock Commission) broadens the Young Farmer Loan Guarantee program. This legislation is designed to help the agriculture industry in Texas by granting loans to young people who do not have the means to start or continue farming.

House Bill 2499 raises the family farm and ranch finance program net worth and loan caps to facilitate use of the program. The program was established to provide affordable financing to farmers and ranchers for the purchase of land for a base of operation.

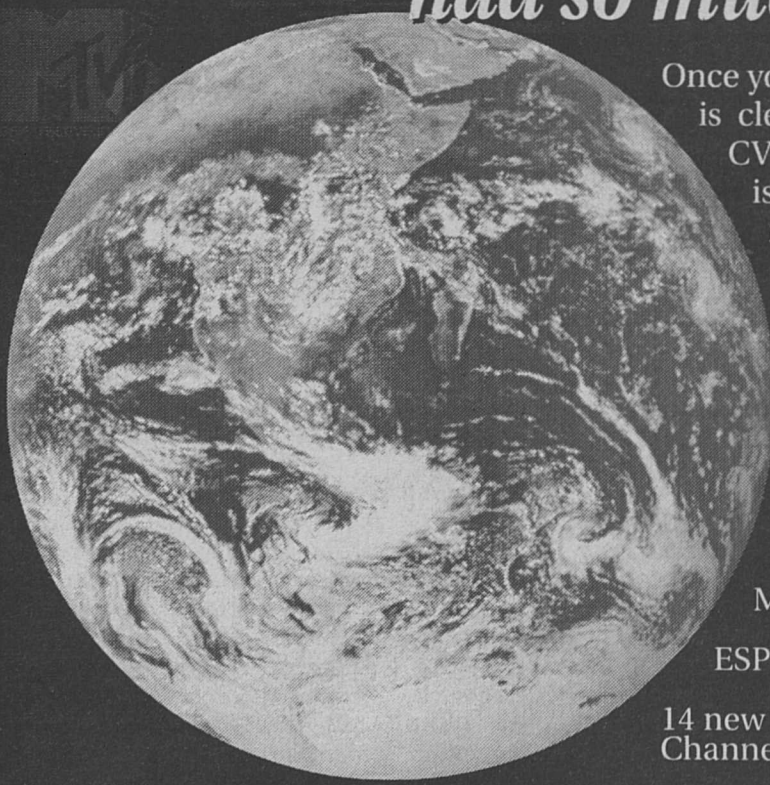
House Bill 2563 would require water districts to hold confirmation elections and manage their groundwater resources or risk losing their authority.

House Bill 2688 allows water districts flexibility in executing documents.

House Bill 2689 allows water districts to alter their fiscal year for

(See Update, Page 4)

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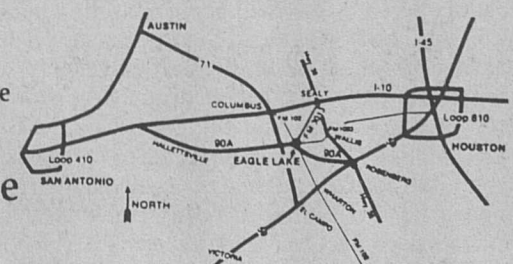
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