

TEXAS LEGISLATIVE REPORT

March-April 2009

The 81st Texas Legislature convened on January 9, 2009 by ousting three term Speaker Tom Craddick from his office as Speaker of the House. His successor, Joe Straus (R-San Antonio) is the first Jewish Speaker of the House since Texas Statehood and arose suddenly to this position in only his third legislative session. Speaker Straus has promised renewed bipartisanship and civility in the House Chamber and his position is regarded as one of the three most powerful leadership roles in state government after Governor & Lt. Governor. The Speaker forms House Committees and appoints members to these committees.

Speaker Straus announced his committee appointments among the 149 Texas House members (76 Republicans & 74 Democrats) to 34 committees and named 18 Republican chairman and 16 Democratic ones. Just 5 of the 31 committee chairs from last session who returned to the House are still leaders. Members filled out committee preference cards; about half the chairman assignments were based on seniority and assignment to committees was based on personal preferences, loyalties, seniority, gender, regional, racial differences, and partisan demands. Former House Speaker Pete Laney (D-Hale Center) stated, "making assignments is the worst part of the job because the leader disappoints more people than he pleases." Before announcing assignments, Speaker Straus said he was prepared to disappoint some people and told lawmakers, "No matter where you are (on a committee), you're free to work on any issue." He told reporters after assignments were made, "I feel we did a credible job and were as fair as we could be."

February 10 was Senior Day at the Capitol and approximately 3,500 seniors from all over Texas came to lobby their causes – long term care, Medicaid payments, and a legislative committee on aging. Several representatives provided refreshments & conference rooms for constituents from their district. Our local chapter (228) visited with 7 Travis County representatives and lobbied their support for various issues ranging from property tax relief to increased funding for nursing homes. We aligned our agenda with the 81st Silver Haired Legislature resolutions.

One of the main issues for elderly Texans this session is Medicaid funding for long-term care. Another priority is the passage of House Bill 610, which would create a Joint Legislative Committee on Aging to focus on workforce development as well as a transportation plan, health care, and affordable housing for seniors.

Sen. Craig Estes (R-Wichita Falls) has filled Senate Bill 18 on eminent domain which would forbid governmental entities from taking personal property to benefit private individuals and would ensure that fair compensation is paid to

people who have their property seized. Gov. Rick Perry vetoed HB 2006 (which was similar) two years ago.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) are pushing for legislation to help crack down on offenders by allowing checkpoints and requiring ignition locks for every one convicted of drunk driving. Texas is one of 11 states that don't allow sobriety checkpoints; in 2007 we led the nation with having 1,292 people killed by drunken drivers. The Center for Disease Control has found that fatalities decreased 24 per cent in states that allow sobriety checkpoints.

General revenue funds for the 2010-2011 biennium are down 10.5% from 2008-2009. In January Comptroller Susan Combs reported a \$9.1 billion decline from \$86.2 to \$77.1 billion in this time period. She cited one of the reasons for the shortfall is that \$3 billion is reserved for property tax relief and a projected decline in the collection of tax revenue during 2010-2011. The state's Rainy Day Fund is projected to contain \$6.7 billion at the end of 2009 and by mid-January House & Senate lawmakers had already made withdrawal requests from that fund.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Ike on September 13, 2008 Speaker Tom Craddick appointed a Select Committee on Hurricane Ike after numerous hearings and testimonies in Southeast Texas. The Committee has recommended stronger building codes, expanding the sales tax holiday to include emergency survival items and putting \$250 million in the state's Disaster Contingency Fund. Many of these recommendations are expected to become legislation during the coming months.

Now that there is new leadership in the Texas legislature and committee assignments have been made, our legislators can "roll up their sleeves" and begin the arduous task of determining how to best meet the various demands of the citizens of Texas while working with decreased revenue and an unstable economic climate. Let's wish them luck!

Albert Prewitt
State Legislative Representative