

Democrat James Talarico launches bid for House seat

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Author: Jonathan Tilove; American-Statesman Staff | Section: METR | 218 Words

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James Talarico, a 28-year-old Round Rock Democrat, said Wednesday that he is seeking the Texas House District 52 seat held by Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock.

"After this past legislative session, we need new leaders willing to fix our broken school finance system, which I see as the No. 1 priority from the state Legislature, and frankly, I admire Larry Gonzales and Speaker (Joe) Straus for trying to find a solution to this problem," Talarico said.

Talarico is executive director of Reasoning Mind, an education nonprofit that provides software to schools in and around San Antonio and Austin, to help low-income students with math and science. He is a former public school teacher in San Antonio. Talarico earned a bachelor's degree in government from the University of Texas and a master's degree in education policy from Harvard University.

The first candidate to announce, back in July, was Republican Jeremy Story of Round Rock, the 42-year-old head of Campus Renewal. He was challenging Gonzales as not conservative enough. Another Republican, Christopher Ward of Round Rock, also said he is running.

Talarico has the endorsement of Democratic Williamson County Commissioner Terry Cook, Round Rock City Council Member Tammy Young, Austin City Council Member Jimmy Flannigan, and a multitude of local Democratic Party leaders.

Contact Jonathan Tilove at 512-445-3572.

Workman raises most in House race - Workman out-raises opponents in western Travis County primary - Goodwin leads cash race among Democrats seeking that seat.

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Author: Johnathan Silver; American-Statesman Staff | Section: METR | 400 Words

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State Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, eclipsed his primary challengers in campaign finance reports posted this week, raising almost \$129,000 in the second half of 2017, spending slightly more than \$78,000 and having about \$135,000 in cash on hand.

Challenger Jay Wiley raised nearly \$77,000, spent \$17,364 and had \$73,746 on hand. Fellow GOP challenger Patty Vredevelt's report was not available Wednesday afternoon.

In the Democratic primary for that Texas House district, which includes a western portion of Austin, Lago Vista, Lakeway and Bee Cave, Vikki Goodwin raised nearly \$30,000, spent \$14,434 and had \$76,870 on hand for the reporting period. Sheri Soltes raised \$11,064, spent nearly \$3,000 and had \$8,112 on hand. Will Simpson raised \$9,383, spent \$11,482 and had \$9,583 on hand. Elaina Fowler raised \$8,416, spent \$1,281 and had \$1,412 on hand. Candace Aylor's report was not available Wednesday afternoon.

In House District 45, which encompasses Blanco and Hays counties, five Republicans and three Democrats are running for the seat being vacated by state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs, who is running for Congress.

Republican Amber Pearce raised much more money than the other candidates in either primary with \$126,555 in contributions, \$27,701 in expenditures and \$114,454 on hand.

District 45 Republican candidates Ken Strange raised \$16,135, spent \$1,618 and had \$20,821 on hand; Naomi Narvaiz raised \$7,687, spent \$6,540 and had \$6,198 on hand; Austin Talley raised \$2,575, spent \$2,501 and had \$649 on hand. Amy Akers raised no money and had no cash on hand for the reporting period.

In the District 45 Democratic primary, Rebecca Bell-Metereau raised \$824, spent \$5,245 and had no cash on hand for the reporting period. Campaign finance reports from Democrats Erin Zwiener and Les Carnes were not available on the Ethics Commission website Wednesday afternoon.

In the race to replace retiring state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, Cynthia Flores stood out in the Republican field with more than \$42,000 in contributions, \$26,425 in expenditures and \$16,572 on hand. Jeremy Story raised \$11,700, spent \$7,700 and had \$4,000 on hand. Christopher L. Ward's report was not available Wednesday. District 52 includes Hutto, most of Round Rock and parts of Georgetown.

James Talarico is running unopposed in the District 52 Democratic primary. He raised \$75,296, spent \$22,124 and had \$71,412 on hand.

Contact Johnathan Silver at 512-445-3631.

3 Republicans vie to replace state Rep. Gonzales - Property taxes, school financing among issues stressed by candidates.

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By Julie Chang

If money raised and endorsements are decisive factors in a political race, Cynthia Flores, a Round Rock social services case manager, would easily win the March 6 Republican primary for Texas House District 52.

The district - currently held by Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales, who isn't running for re-election - encompasses most of Round Rock, some of Georgetown and extends east to Hutto and Taylor.

Flores had raised \$92,000 by Jan. 25 and had the endorsements of Gov. Greg Abbott, Gonzales and Texas Alliance for Life, among others.

Careful with how she addresses certain issues that have divided the GOP, Flores wouldn't comment to the American-Statesman on the performance of outgoing Texas House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, whom the Texas State Republican Executive Committee has censured for obstructing the party's conservative agenda. Straus and his lieutenants blocked bills last year restricting bathroom use by transgender people.

"I'm not going to get into what I thought about him," Flores said of Straus. "I don't think that does any good. I think we need to look forward."

She instead said she is ardently against elective abortions and wants to further boost border security to prevent human trafficking. Flores said she supports requiring voters to approve property tax increases of 4 percent or more - currently, elections are triggered at 8 percent - and bring down property taxes in part through addressing the inefficient way school districts are funded. She said she supports increasing the state's share of public school funding so that local property taxpayers aren't shouldering most of the burden.

Chris Ward, a clinical trial auditor who is second in fundraising with \$17,000 in contributions, said he's not a fan of Straus or Gonzales. Straus isn't conservative enough, and Gonzales didn't do enough to address high property taxes, he said.

Ward said he also wants to fix school financing to help curb property tax increases. To bring costs down for schools, he wants to consider consolidating services and positions at small school districts, ensure that school districts are granting construction projects to lowest bidders when possible and eliminate the recapture system under which school districts with high property wealth give some of their revenue back to the state to be redistributed to property-poor school districts.

The Round Rock school district will send back \$8.3 million in recapture money in 2018, according to an estimate from the Texas Education Agency.

"I'm not going to be type of person to say that all things can't be on the table," Ward said of his approach to fixing school finance.

Ward said if he's elected, he will donate the \$14,400 salary he would make over his two-year term as state representative to nonprofits in the district, including those that help victims of domestic violence.

The third Republican candidate, religious nonprofit president Jeremy Story, has raised \$12,000. He did not respond to requests for an interview.

The Republican primary winner will face Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, in the November election. Talarico has raised \$75,000. Early voting for the primaries ends Friday.

Contact Julie Chang

at 512-912-2565.

Twitter: @juliechang1

(Box)

* Cynthia Flores, 52, is a case manager for the Round Rock Area Serving Center, which provides such social services as a food pantry and financial assistance for utilities and rent for low-income residents. She has a bachelor's degree in rehabilitation studies from the University of North Texas.

Civic participation: Flores is a community representative on the Allen Baca Senior Center Advisory Board and was appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott to the board of directors for the Brazos River Authority. She is a member of the Professional Women of Williamson County organization, Catholic Business Networking and Williamson County Non-Profit Networking group.

* Jeremy Story is the president of Campus Renewal, a nonprofit that organizes campus ministries. He has a government degree from the University of Texas, according to his website.

Civic participation: Story serves on the board of directors for the National Day of Prayer and is the state chaplain for the Republican Party of Texas, according to his website.

* Chris Ward, 42, audits clinical trials to ensure patient safety and proper data reporting. He has a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences from the University of South Florida and a master's degree in critical incident management from Saint Leo University.

Civic participation: Ward said he's been involved in charities including the American Cancer Society, Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, Halo House, Austin Angels, Veteran Collective, Boot Campaign and 22Kill. As a member of the motorcycle community, he has also supported Texas Baptist Children's Home, Helping Hand Home and Clubs for Kids.

* James Talarico is the only Democrat running in Texas House District 52. He is executive director for Reasoning Mind, a nonprofit that provides math learning material for children. He has a bachelor's degree in government from the University of Texas and a master's degree in education policy from Harvard University, according to his website.

Civic participation: Talarico did not respond to a request for comment from the American-Statesman.

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About the candidates

State House, Senate races in Central Texas

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Texas House Dist. 47

State Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, secured his party's nomination with 59.5 percent of the GOP vote in state House District 47, which encompasses western Travis County. Business owner Jay Wiley had 31.2 percent of the vote, and Patty Vredevelt, a retired nurse, had 9.3 percent. Real estate broker Vikki Goodwin, who took 33.6 percent of vote in the District 47 Democratic primary, will face Elaina Fowler, who runs an employee retiree group and won 29.2 percent of vote, in a May 22 runoff. Nonprofit owner Sheri Soltes got 23.7 percent of the Democratic vote; nurse Candace Aylor, 7 percent; and company exec Will Simpson, 6 percent.

Texas House Dist. 52

With 60.8 percent of vote, social services case manager Cynthia Flores, who had the backing of Gov. Greg Abbott, won the Republican nomination in state House District 52, which encompasses portions of Williamson County. She bested Chris Ward, a clinical auditor, who had 16.8 percent of vote, and religious nonprofit president Jeremy Story, who had 22.4 percent of vote. Flores will face Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, in the November general election. He ran unopposed Tuesday.

Texas House Dist. 45

Wimberley school board member Ken Strange won the GOP primary in House District 45, which encompasses Hays and Blanco counties. Strange took 54.7 percent of vote, and business owner Amber Pearce got 24.4 percent, followed by citizen activist Naomi Narvaiz (9.2 percent), Austin Talley (6.8 percent) and Amy Akers (4.9 percent). Texas State University professor Rebecca Bell-Metereau, who won 45.4 percent of the vote in the District 45 Democratic primary, will face Erin Zwiener, who got 30.7 percent of the vote, in a runoff. Les Carnes, a criminal analyst for Travis County constable Precinct 3, had 23.9 percent of the vote.

Senate District 25

With 73.7 percent of the Republican vote, state Sen. Donna Campbell, R-New Braunfels, an emergency room doctor, defeated Shannon McClendon, a gay lawyer motivated to run by the unsuccessful attempts to crack down on transgender-friendly bathrooms last year. In November, Campbell will face Democratic primary winner Steven Kling, a retired Army Reserve captain who works in information technology. Kling narrowly defeated Jack Guerra, a property investor and former city planner, with a 1-point margin.

Senate District 5

An orthopedic surgeon seeking a second term, state Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, beat Harold Ramm, a longtime superintendent for several Texas school districts, with 75.1 percent of the vote. Among Democrats, auditor Meg Walsh, who got 71.1 percent of the vote, trounced two challengers - management consultant Brian Cronin (16.9 percent) and Glenn "Grumpy" Williams, a former Child Protective Services lawyer (11.9 percent) - and will face Schwertner in November.

Julie Chang,

American-Statesman staff

State Rep. Gonzales leaving office today - Vote to fill seat could occur day of general election.

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State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, said he is resigning today to focus his attention on rebuilding his graphic design business.

Gonzales, whose district encompasses most of Round Rock, all of Hutto and Taylor, and parts of Georgetown, was first elected in 2010. Gonzales announced in August that he would not be running for re-election.

"Forty-eight years old, self-employed and two kids in high school - it's very difficult for guys like me to make a living and to serve as a legislator. I'm honored to do it but it's no doubt that it's taken a little toll on my family and it's time to get that back in order," Gonzales told the American-Statesman.

Gov. Greg Abbott must call a special election to fill Gonzales' seat. That election could occur Nov. 6, the day of the general election.

Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, and Republican Cynthia Flores, a social services case manager, will face off in the general election.

Gonzales, who is chairman of a House Appropriations subcommittee, is one of three Hispanic Republicans in the Texas Legislature. The other two are Reps. Jason Villalba of Dallas, who lost the Republican primary in his district in March, and J.M. Lozano of Kingsville.

Gonzales played a critical role in last summer's special session, successfully guiding the one must-pass piece of legislation - extending for two years operations of the Texas Medical Board and four other agencies - a task that was left undone at the end of the regular session, requiring Abbott to call the special session.

Gonzales said his biggest achievements in the Legislature include extending insurance coverage of physical and occupational therapies for children with autism as well as requiring physical education classes to be more accommodating for children with autism.

"This isn't something that wins you re-election, but I'm telling you, it's the stuff that truly changes lives. Unless you're in that world, you have no idea what we accomplished," Gonzales said.

Contact Julie Chang at 512-912-2565.

Twitter: @juliechang1

Ex-state Rep. Gonzales takes lobbyist job

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Though Larry Gonzales has resigned from his Texas House seat, his new position will likely often lead him back to the state Capitol.

Lobbying and political advocacy firm Husch Blackwell Strategies announced that Gonzales is joining its Texas team as a senior consultant, where he'll work on behalf of clients to help steer state legislation. In a news release, the firm noted Gonzales' experience as both an elected state representative and his earlier role on staff at the lieutenant governor and attorney general's offices.

"Larry brings to our team a deep understanding of the public policy issues our clients care about and his strategic counsel will be a tremendous asset to our firm," Andy Blunt, chairman of the board and chief operating officer for Husch Blackwell Strategies, said in the release.

Among Husch Blackwell Strategies' clients are Dell Technologies, Audubon, General Motors and MillerCoors, its website states. Past endeavors have been advocating on behalf of individuals persecuted by their own governments abroad, legislative intervention for national mortgage and financial market institutions, and developing legislative support for online gaming issues.

Gonzales, a Republican from Round Rock who had represented the District 52 House seat since 2010, announced in September he would not seek a fifth term in the House. He said nothing in particular led him to not run, but that he is focused on spending more time with his wife and children.

Three Republicans - Cynthia Flores, Jeremy Story and Chris Ward - vied for seat in the March primary. Flores, a case manager at the Round Rock Area Serving Center, won that race and will face Democrat James Talarico in November.

With Gonzales' resignation, the state House will hold a special election to fill the remainder of his term through November. That election could occur Nov. 6, the same day of the general election.

Gonzales is president and owner of Lazarus Graphics, a communications and public relations firm. He earned a master of arts degree from the Texas State University School of Public Administration and has a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas.

Contact Mike Parker at 512-255-5827.

There may or may not be a blue wave come November, but, with

October 11, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 783 Words

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There may or may not be a blue wave come November, but, with the notable exception of U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke, D-El Paso — who is outpacing every U.S. Senate candidate in the country in raising money in his bid to defeat U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas — fundraising by the rest of the Texas Democratic Party's statewide ticket is more of a trickle.

According to campaign finance statements for the period between July 1 and Sept. 27, which were due midnight Tuesday with the Texas Ethics Commission, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's re-election campaign has a nearly 90-to-1 cash advantage over Democratic challenger Lupe Valdez heading into the homestretch of the 2018 campaign.

Valdez's campaign reported raising \$680,000, and spent \$604,000, leaving her campaign with \$303,000 in the bank. Texans for Greg Abbott raised \$5.7 million dollars in the same period, spent \$7.3 million, and had \$26.8 million in cash on hand.

That's actually a less onerous gap for Valdez, the former Dallas County sheriff, than the 1,000-to-1 cash advantage Abbott held over her late-starting campaign at the beginning of the year.

Abbott, however, still flush with cash, is determined to turn out Republican voters in numbers that could give him a crushing victory and ensure, barring a truly historic tsunami, comfortable wins for all the down-ballot Republicans on the statewide ticket — who haven't suffered a loss since 1994 — in a state in which about 60 percent of all voters punch a straight ticket vote. (The Cruz-O'Rourke race and congressional contests appear above the governor's race atop ballots.)

Judging by his latest fundraising numbers, Republican Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller seems content to draft on Abbott's operation. In the third quarter, Miller collected an astonishingly meager \$24,570, leaving his campaign with less than \$53,000 in the bank. Democratic rival Kim Olson raised more than \$130,000 and finished the quarter with nearly \$162,000 in cash on hand.

But Miller spokesman Todd Smith said one has to look at fundraising "in the totality" and that Miller's campaign is confident it has all the money it needs to win in November. Miller does maintain a fierce social media presence, thanks to his delight in politically incorrect, and sometimes factually inaccurate, pro-Trump memes, and has a nose for free media, garnering headlines this week for backing the Sons of Confederate Veterans desire for a Confederate-themed specialty Texas license plate.

"The numbers tell an important story about how Texans are ready for a change," Olson campaign manager Kolby Monnig said in an emailed statement. And Olson's haul, while greater than Miller's, was less than James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for Texas House District 52, raised in a single competitive Williamson County race.

Justin Nelson, the Democratic nominee for Texas attorney general, did the best of the down-ballot Democratic candidates, raising \$1.1 million and leaving him with \$1.7 million for his campaign against Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, who raised \$488,000, spent \$3.2 million and had \$4.3 million in the bank.

"This report shows that we have the resources to inform voters across Texas, allowing them to best decide who to hire as a lawyer for all Texans," Nelson said in a statement. "I believe nobody is above the law, including Ken Paxton — the first statewide official in Texas history to run for re-election while indicted."

That's the message Nelson has been trying to hammer home about Paxton, but it's one that he would need a lot more money than he has raised so far to reach a critical mass of voters in a state the size of Texas.

In the race for lieutenant governor, Dan Patrick, the Republican incumbent, raised \$1.6 million, spent \$7.5 million and had \$8.2 million in cash on hand. Democratic challenger Mike Collier raised \$396,000, spent \$263,000, and had \$233,00 in the bank.

Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush raised \$181,400, spent \$272,000, and had \$827,000 in the bank.

Bush's Democratic opponent, energy and natural resources attorney Miguel Suazo, raised \$26,000, over the same period, spent \$128,000 and had \$12,000 in his campaign coffers.

Comptroller Glenn Hegar raised \$112,000, spent \$62,000 and had \$5 million to spend or save. Democrat Joi Chevalier raised \$27,000, spent \$16,000 and had \$19,000 in cash on hand.

Republican Railroad Commissioner Christi Craddick raised \$364,000, spent \$300,000 and had \$1.6 million in the bank, while her Democratic rival, Roman McAllen, raised \$14,000, spent \$12,000 and had a little more than \$5,000 in his campaign account.

Meanwhile, despite her lagging fundraising, Valdez still had her game face on in a fundraising solicitation Wednesday: "If you're ready to build a Texas that's open to everyone and that works for everyone, make a contribution to my campaign today of \$10 or whatever you are able towards our Oct 27 fundraising goal."

Staff writers Asher Price and Johnathan Silver contributed to this story.

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Abbott holds huge fundraising lead

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Staff writers Asher Price and Johnathan Silver contributed to this story.

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Hoping to energize Democratic voters ahead of the coming election

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Hoping to energize Democratic voters ahead of the coming election, Texas Democratic candidates launched a statewide bus tour Wednesday in Northwest Austin.

“This allows us to get out and talk to voters,” said Mike Collier, Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor. “We like each other as a slate, we all have a similar world view. Politics should be joyful, and that’s what this is.”

At a kick-off event at the Williamson County Democratic Party headquarters, Collier was joined by statewide candidates Lupe Valdez, running for governor; Joi Chevalier, running for comptroller; Miguel Suazo, running for land commissioner; Roman McAllen, running for railroad commissioner; and Kathy Cheng, Texas Supreme Court candidate for Place 6. Local candidates also were present: James Talarico, running for Texas House District 52, John Bucy, running for Texas House District 136, and MJ Hegar, running in the 31st Congressional District.

Unity and working across party lines were the main themes. Talarico, a former middle school teacher, said he was “proud to be standing here” with “selfless, committed servant-leaders.”

“A lot of people are trying to tear us apart at a time when ... most of us agree on where we want to go,” said Hegar, who is running against U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Round Rock, in a district that encompasses most of Williamson and Bell counties.

Candidates, their aides and supporters took pictures of themselves outside the bus, which was wrapped in blue.

“On the road for a fair shot for all,” says the bumper of the vehicle.

“Health care, strong schools, and an economy that works for everyone,” is the motto on the side of the bus, in English on one side and Spanish on the other.

After Wednesday’s scheduled stops at College Station and Katy, the bus is due in the Metroplex on Thursday before heading back through Central Texas on Friday on its way to San Antonio.

Saturday morning starts with a block-walk in Laredo, lunch in Alice, and afternoon get-togethers in Brownsville and Edinburg. Sunday, the final day of the “Fair Shot for All Bus Tour,” begins in Kingsville, before heading northeast through the Corpus Christi area and Victoria and ending, at 5 p.m. in San Marcos, with a last rally on the eve of early voting at San Marcos Plaza Park.

The bus, which the driver said was the same one that Hillary Clinton had used for her 2016 presidential bid, might act like a rolling fundraising machine.

Manny Garcia, Texas Democratic Party deputy executive director, said that among other activities on the bus, he thought candidates would be “dialing for dollars and preparing for their next campaign stop and the one after that.”

Complete with televisions, Wi-Fi, a kitchen, an office and a full bathroom, the bus has room for up to 20 people – leaving campaign aides and family members to follow in a caravan of “chase cars” stuffed full of yard signs and campaign literature.

Texas Democratic Party officials declined to say how much the bus cost, but the website of Nashville, Tenn.-based

Premiere Transportation, which rented the vehicle, says daily rates range from \$1,800 to \$2,800.

The bus tour comes as polls suggest Texas Democratic candidates are unlikely to win statewide races.

“Everyone tells me it’s an uphill battle,” Valdez said. “What other kind of battle is there? A piece-of-cake battle?”

Early voting begins Monday. Election Day is Nov. 6.

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Abbott: Williamson County key election battleground

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GEORGETOWN — With the Williamson County Republican slate arrayed behind him and a packed house of more than 200 GOP faithful at Mesquite Creek Outfitters before him, Gov. Greg Abbott broke the news Tuesday that, if they didn't already know it, they occupy the most contested terrain in Texas politics.

"You may know that in the state of Texas there are 254 counties," Abbott said. "I believe that there is one county that is of the greatest consequence in this election and you're in it right now."

"You need to understand how hard the battle is being fought in Williamson County," Abbott continued. "This is not your father's Williamson County, definitely not your grandfather's Williamson County. This is a true purple county the way it's going to turn out vote-wise and hence it is important that every single person in this room not only be engaged but you need to make sure that for the next entire week the most important thing in your entire life is what you can do to make sure we keep Williamson County red."

As if to confirm Abbott's caution, his Democratic rival, Lupe Valdez, on Sunday stopped by the Round Rock storefront headquarters of James Talarico to give a pep talk to about 40 volunteers. Talarico, 29, well less than half the age of Valdez, the former Dallas County sheriff who just turned 71, is locked in a tight contest with Cynthia Flores of Round Rock to succeed former Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales who typified the temperate conservatism that works well in Williamson County and in a district where President Donald Trump defeated Democrat Hillary Clinton by a scant 1.4 percentage points.

The same holds true for state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, who told the crowd Tuesday that his opponent, John Bucy, is "not just a Democrat, he's an extreme liberal." Dale, whose district Clinton carried by nearly 2 percentage points over Trump, includes Abbott in his TV ads, and said, "we owe a great debt to Gov. Abbott for keeping everyone elected here in Williamson County."

Abbott's money advantage

The get-out-the-vote event in Georgetown, and one later in the day in Sugar Land, were the 18th and 19th events Abbott has done during early voting. Abbott has also contributed millions of dollars in direct and in-kind donations to down-ballot Republican candidates.

The Abbott-Valdez race is not close. A new Quinnipiac University poll released Monday had Valdez trailing Abbott by 14 percentage points, a 6-point improvement over her 20-point deficit in Quinnipiac's Oct. 11 survey, enabling her campaign to issue a press release suggesting she was "closing the gap." But the fundraising reports covering the last month that were due Monday at midnight indicated that while Abbott had raised an additional \$3.6 million and his campaign had \$19.7 million in cash on hand with its TV advertising already paid for, Valdez had raised \$361,252, and was about out of gas with \$60,237 in the bank and no TV time bought the entire campaign.

Valdez said she had impressed herself with her reserves of energy, and she closed out her speech at a Planned Parenthood get-out-the-vote event at Cheer up Charlies in Austin Saturday afternoon exhorting the crowd that her whole life has been an uphill battle and, "We're going to take that freaking hill and take it up strong. The grassroots are in ascension. We are going to beat the Republican money machine."

Texas as GOP bulwark

Abbott was introduced in Georgetown by U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Round Rock, who, after eight terms, finds himself facing Democrat MJ Hegar, who has raised and spent well more than what Valdez has, to contest a district that Trump won by 13 percentage points, more than the 9 points Trump won by statewide. Last week, actress Natalie Portman came from California to campaign for Hegar.

“Why would anyone come in and throw \$4 (million) or \$5 million into this area of the state?” Carter said. “What is their goal and what are they investing in this other than trying to buy a congressional seat which really ain’t worth anything?”

“The reason why all this money is flowing into the Beto (O’Rourke Senate) race and my race and the (U.S. Rep. John) Culberson (R-Houston) race and the (U.S. Rep. Pete) Sessions (R-Dallas) race, all this money where they’ve never seen this kind of money before, is if they turn Texas, they turn the nation,” Carter said. “That’s all they’ve got to do.”

But, Carter said, “They don’t know who they’re messing with.”

Of Abbott, Carter said, “The person who leads us is the Republican leader beyond any other leader in the whole country.”

“He won’t walk away from a fight; he won’t roll away from a fight,” Carter said. Abbott is in a wheelchair after being paralyzed as a young man.

Asked by reporters after his two stops his take on Trump’s statement that he will try to do away with birthright citizenship by executive order, Abbott said in Georgetown that he would have to study the question, and in Sugar Land said it was something Congress would have to deal with.

Valdez, in a statement, said, “Donald Trump’s hateful rhetoric is a campaign ploy intended to incite fear before a critical and consequential election, and comes in the wake of plummeting poll numbers for both him and the Republican Party.”

GEORGETOWN — With the Williamson County Republican slate arr

October 31, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 874 Words

Page: A4

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GEORGETOWN — With the Williamson County Republican slate arrayed behind him and a packed house of more than 200 GOP faithful at Mesquite Creek Outfitters before him, Gov. Greg Abbott broke the news Tuesday that, if they didn't already know it, they occupy the most contested terrain in Texas politics.

"You may know that in the state of Texas there are 254 counties," Abbott said. "I believe that there is one county that is of the greatest consequence in this election and you're in it right now."

"You need to understand how hard the battle is being fought in Williamson County," Abbott continued. "This is not your father's Williamson County, definitely not your grandfather's Williamson County. This is a true purple county the way it's going to turn out vote-wise and hence it is important that every single person in this room not only be engaged but you need to make sure that for the next entire week the most important thing in your entire life is what you can do to make sure we keep Williamson County red."

As if to confirm Abbott's caution, his Democratic rival, Lupe Valdez, on Sunday stopped by the Round Rock storefront headquarters of James Talarico to give a pep talk to about 40 volunteers. Talarico, 29, well less than half the age of Valdez, the former Dallas County sheriff who just turned 71, is locked in a tight contest with Cynthia Flores of Round Rock to succeed former Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales who typified the temperate conservatism that works well in Williamson County and in a district where President Donald Trump defeated Democrat Hillary Clinton by a scant 1.4 percentage points.

The same holds true for state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, who told the crowd Tuesday that his opponent, John Bucy, is "not just a Democrat, he's an extreme liberal." Dale, whose district Clinton carried by nearly 2 percentage points over Trump, includes Abbott in his TV ads, and said, "we owe a great debt to Gov. Abbott for keeping everyone elected here in Williamson County."

Abbott's money advantage

The get-out-the-vote event in Georgetown, and one later in the day in Sugar Land, were the 18th and 19th events Abbott has done during early voting. Abbott has also contributed millions of dollars in direct and in-kind donations to down-ballot Republican candidates.

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Talarico, Flores vie for House seat

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Author: Julie Chang jchang@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 529 Words

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In predominantly Republican Williamson County, James Talarico knows he needs to stand out to win as a Democrat. So he livestreamed on Facebook his walk across the length of the district, about 25 miles, in a day.

At 29, he'd be the youngest member of the Legislature. "We haven't been shy about telling folks that. I think having new blood and having fresh perspective is what people want," said Talarico, who faces Republican Cynthia Flores, 53, a social services manager, in House District 52.

The winner will serve a full two-year term as well two months left in former Rep. Larry Gonzales' term. Gonzales, a Round Rock Republican, left office in June and now works for a lobbying firm.

The last time Williamson County voters elected a Democrat — Diana Maldonado — to the Texas House was in 2008, when District 52 included parts of Austin and Democratic turnout was high.

The district now encompasses much of Round Rock, Taylor and Hutto. President Donald Trump received 1,000 more votes than Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in the district in 2016.

Talarico, who previously led an education nonprofit, raised \$400,000 between Jan. 1 and Oct. 27, according to most recent campaign finance reports. Flores, who received Gov. Greg Abbott's endorsement during the March primary, has raised \$328,000 more than Talarico. Flores also has received \$250,000 from Texans for Lawsuit Reform, which supports tort reform.

Flores' husband is Rene Flores, a member of the Round Rock City Council.

Flores declined a phone interview with the American-Statesman for this story but opted to submit answers to questions via email.

If elected, she said she would support increasing the state's share of educational funding, which is currently estimated to be 38 percent. Local property taxpayers are on the hook for most of the rest.

"Shifting the burden of funding schools from property taxpayers to the state will largely rely on increased sales tax revenue," Flores said. She did not specify how

She said she would work to increase funding for skills training programs and high school career and technology courses.

Flores said she would work to decrease human smuggling, "punishing those who engage in sex trafficking of women and minors."

If elected, Talarico said he would support a constitutional amendment that would force the state to pay 50 percent of the total cost of public school funding. He also wants to eliminate loopholes in the tax code that would force commercial property owners to pay more. He also said the Legislature needs to update the recapture system, which relies on outdated funding formulas to determine how much property-wealthy school districts send to the state to support property-poor school districts.

Talarico, who taught in the San Antonio school district for two years, said he doesn't support using state money, like

vouchers, to help families pay for private school tuition.

"My opponent has proposed using public money to support private schools, which is something I fundamentally disagree with. I respect my opponent and like her personally, but still disagree pretty deeply on the direction we should take for our local schools," Talarico said.

Flores has said she supports spending state money for private tuition in cases of students with disabilities and special needs.

Election Day is Tuesday.

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Battleground for Texas House found in suburbs - A dozen GOP seats concentrated in Dallas, Austin in play this election

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Author: Johnathan Silver and Julie Chang jsilver@statesman.com jchang@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 1026 Words

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If Texas Democrats make gains this election, they most likely will come in down-ballot races, where a dozen GOP-held state House seats are seen as vulnerable. Those districts are concentrated in the booming suburbs of Austin and Dallas, where population growth and demographic changes have altered the electoral landscape.

Austin's suburbs are home to thousands of new arrivals, both from outside the area and from Austin, in search of more affordable housing and, in some cases, better schools. Many of the new suburbanites vote more like Austinites than longtime residents of places like Buda and Cedar Park, according to Texas political scientists.

The shift was evident two years ago, when Hillary Clinton edged President Donald Trump in 10 Texas House districts won by Republicans, including one suburban Austin district. Seven were in the Dallas area, and two in Houston.

This year, amid high turnout during early voting and with Democrats motivated by Trump and a popular Democratic candidate at the top of the ticket — U.S. Senate candidate Beto O'Rourke — party leaders are optimistic they can make a significant dent in the Republicans' majority in the Texas House, which stood at 40 seats in the last legislative session.

Rice University political science professor Mark Jones, who studies Texas politics, identified a dozen battleground House districts, all held now or most recently by a Republican. Of those, he considers six toss-ups. In the other six, he gives the GOP candidates a slight edge.

Republicans hold a significant money advantage in those contests, however, according an American-Statesman analysis of campaign finance data. In all but one of the 12 races, Republican candidates on average raised twice as much money as their Democratic rivals this year.

Still, Texas Democratic leaders are eying as many as 25 GOP seats they say Democrats can win — districts either won by Clinton or where Trump won by 10 points or less. That would give the party a majority in the House, an unlikely outcome on Tuesday night.

Jones predicts Democrats will pick up three to 10 GOP seats.

The more the better for Democrats' chances of influencing who becomes the next Texas House speaker, Jones said.

In the Austin area, four districts are on Jones' list:

- District 45 (leans Republican), where state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs, isn't running for re-election.
- District 47 (toss-up), where state Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, is seeking a fifth term.
- District 52 (toss-up), without representation since June, when state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, stepped down.
- District 136 (toss-up), where state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, is seeking a fourth term.

Hays County

Republican Ken Strange, a Wimberley school board member and director of Wimberley EMS, said his campaign's internal analysis of early voters show he's leading in District 45, though he didn't provide a margin.

The district is dominated by Hays County, one of the fastest-growing counties in the country and home to the 39,000-student Texas State University, where early voting was expanded after high interest and a threat of a lawsuit.

Early voting turnout in the county topped 46 percent.

Trump defeated Clinton in Hays County by less than a percentage point — 600 votes — but in rural Blanco County, the other half of the two-county district, Trump won by 3,000 votes. In the March primary, 13,000 Republicans and 11,000 Democrats voted in the district.

Erin Zwiener, Strange's Democratic opponent, said she has been targeting the fast-growing areas of the district, including the Interstate 35 corridor, where she said there are 20,000 more registered voters than two years ago.

"We're one of the most educated districts in Texas. We're young both because of the college and young families in Buda, Kyle and San Marcos. We have a high Hispanic population and a growing African-American population. All the ingredients are here" for a Democrat to win, Zwiener, an author and educator, said Friday.

Travis County

Across Travis County, 368,000 ballots were cast in early voting, just slightly below the 2016 early voting total and far exceeding the 2014 total.

Vikki Goodwin, the Democratic candidate for District 47, the western portion of the county, predicted a close race. She said she's been targeting more conservative areas, including Lake Travis, Lakeway and Lago Vista.

Workman, who has made a name for himself by fighting Austin ordinances he considers too restrictive, is the only Travis County Republican in the Texas House.

The district was nearly evenly split between Trump and Clinton. And during the March primary, Democratic voters in the district outnumbered Republican voters, 16,018 to 15,317.

Williamson County

Early voting totals in Williamson County slightly exceeded the total in 2016, and turnout there was second-highest among the state's 30 largest counties.

"We know that the Beto movement has definitely motivated the Democrats to come out," said Cynthia Flores, the Republican running in House District 52, which encompasses much of Round Rock, Hutto and Taylor. "But we have an incredible team in Williamson County, and Gov. Greg Abbott has really supported our county and has been very well received. I feel very positive."

Abbott's campaign has given Flores, a social services manager, \$67,000 for political advertising.

Her Democratic opponent, James Talarico, who previously led an education nonprofit, said his campaign's analysis shows Democrats turning out who typically stay home for midterm elections.

"I think it's a dead heat," Talarico said. "If we elect good, decent people to office this year it will be because there's a coalition between Democratic voters, independent voters and Republicans who are willing to stand up to their party."

In House District 146, encompassing Cedar Park and Leander, Dale is facing Democrat John Bucy, a small-business owner, for a second time.

When he first ran against Dale in 2014, Bucy lost by 13 percentage points. Bucy became chairman of the Williamson County Democrats in 2016 and focused on building the party's structure. The effort paid off with nine Democrats elected to city and county offices, he said.

For his part, Dale said he's seeing enthusiasm among Republican voters. He said on the Texas Insider podcast Oct. 27: "What you hear from the left is they want to say the demographics are changing in Williamson County. And that's just code to say, 'Hey, Republicans, don't show up and vote,' because they want to win."

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Legislature - Democrats see likely gains in Texas House - 4 Central Texas Republicans losing in early returns

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Author: Sean Collins Walsh and Julie Chang swalsh@statesman.com jchang@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 448 Words

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As early results rolled in Tuesday night, Democrats were optimistic that they would make significant gains in the state House and Senate, despite their legislative candidates having received less attention and money than those taking on the Lone Star State's GOP members of Congress.

About a dozen Democrats vying for GOP-held House seats were leading through early voting, as well as two Democrats seeking to topple Republican incumbents in the Senate. In close races, however, early results don't always match the final tallies, and some observers predicted Republicans would fare better on Election Day.

Before Tuesday, Democrats said they had hopes of gaining about 10 seats in the lower chamber, plus one or two in the Senate. But even if Democrats exceed expectations, any gains are unlikely to affect the balance of power in the Capitol, where Republicans held 95 of 150 House seats in the last legislative session and 21 of 31 in the Senate.

In the Senate, Democrat Nathan Johnson was ahead through early voting in his bid to unseat Sen. Don Huffines, R-Dallas, as was Beverly Powell, the Democrat running against Sen. Konni Burton, R-Colleyville.

In Austin-area House races, several incumbents looked to be in danger. Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, was trailing his Democratic challenger, John Bucy III, in early results for House District 136, and Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, was behind Democrat Vikki Goodwin in House District 47.

Democrat Erin Zwiener led Republican Ken Strange in the race for outgoing Rep. Jason Isaac's Hays County-based District 45. In House District 52, where Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, stepped down, Democrat James Talarico was beating Republican Cynthia Flores.

Early results indicated some other notable Central Texas seats are likely to stay in the hands of the current occupant's party.

Democrat Sheryl Cole, a former Austin City Council member, was coasting to victory over Republican Gabriel Nila in House District 46 to replace longtime Rep. Dawnna Dukes, who fell to Cole in the primary.

Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, led Democrat Meg Walsh in Senate District 5, which was considered a safe GOP seat until it was revealed recently that Schwertner is being investigated by the University of Texas for alleged sexual misconduct, which he denies.

While the GOP majorities in both chambers are not in danger, Democratic gains could affect the agenda for next year's legislative session. In the House, members will choose a new speaker when they convene in January; a larger Democratic caucus could help the party influence the race.

And in the Senate, a major Democratic wave could threaten the GOP super-majority, which allows Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, to override Democratic attempts to slow down his agenda through procedural hurdles.

we say - Democracy, diversity were the big winners

November 8, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: TX Opinion | 674 Words

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As relieved or as joyful as Cruz supporters are now, however, they were not the biggest winners in Texas' midterm elections. That victory belonged to the people and to Texas' diversity. That victory belonged to voter participation and to democracy.

If demographics are destiny, Texas politics began to look just a little more like its future Tuesday. Actually, it began to look a little more like its present.

Women, minorities, Latinos, African Americans, Muslims, young people, first-time voters, gays, lesbians - all played pivotal roles in an election season that will be remembered for awakening Texas from its voter participation slumber. And while it's true that Republicans held on to all the top statewide offices - Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick handily won re-election and the GOP still controls the statehouse - Democrats also won important races, propelled by women and minority candidates and voters.

Led by female candidates, Democrats flipped 12 House seats formerly held by Republicans, the biggest shift in that chamber since 2010. Among that slate of women, Democrat Vikki Goodwin defeated Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, in District 47. Workman's seat was among a dozen concentrated in Dallas and Austin suburbs and considered in play because population growth and demographic change had transformed the electoral landscape. In addition, the election of Democrat Erin Zwiener in the House 45 seat in Hays and Blanco counties, and House victories for Dallas-area Democrats Jessica González and Julie Johnson, will increase the number of Texas LGBTQ lawmakers from two to five.

Nationwide, more than a hundred women - a record - were elected to Congress in a night of numerous firsts for women and minorities. Former El Paso County Judge Veronica Escobar and state Sen. Sylvia Garcia of Houston became the first Latinas from Texas elected to Congress.

"Women ran, women donated, women volunteered, women organized, women won. Now, watch them govern. I can hardly wait," Wendy Davis, the former Texas senator, tweeted. Davis was referring to the national picture, but the sentiment was the same in Texas, where women played influential roles running and mobilizing in races across the state.

Latinos, a historically untapped voting group, also played important roles. How much is still to be determined as analysts crunch votes, but groups working to mobilize Latino voting statewide reported a surge in Latino turnout, especially among young first-time voters. Organizers working to one day turn Texas blue hope to capitalize on young U.S.-born Hispanics, who are driving growth among the Latino population overall.

Latinos make up 39 percent of Texas' population. About 41 percent of eligible Latino voters in Texas are ages 18 to 33, according to the Pew Research Center.

Texas does everything big, everyone likes to say. But voter turnout has been more like a big embarrassment - turnout in the state had been abysmal, ranking dead last in the 2014 midterm elections.

This time, however, and with O'Rourke holding voters' fascination and drawing first-timers into the fold, Texas set early voting records. More people cast early ballots in the state's largest counties than in the entire state in the 2014 midterm overall.

With new voters and fresh faces in government more representative of who we are as a state, Texans must now call on those coming to office in Austin in January to work together to do the people's work. As we have said before, it is our government.

Among the House Republicans who lost their jobs Tuesday, Ron Simmons of Carrollton carried the bathroom bill during the 2017 legislative session. We hope this signals to legislators that they should focus on issues voters care about, like school finance and property tax reform, public education and healthcare - not social wedge issues.

We are encouraged by the words of James Talarico, who became the first Democrat elected in Williamson County's House District 52 since 2008.

"This is not a win for the Democratic Party, it's a win for the people of House District 52," Talarico said, adding that he would work to overcome partisan divides.

"So we can put people over politics," he said.

And in the process do the people's work.

American-Statesman Editorial Board

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Fueled by suburban gains, Democrats also pick up 2 seats in the state Senate

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Author: Julie Chang and Sean Collins Walsh jchang@statesman.com swalsh@statesman.com Section: TX News | 782 Words

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Democrats on Tuesday picked up four GOP-held Texas House seats in the Austin suburbs, helping to fuel their party's gains in the Legislature.

State Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, lost to Democratic challenger, John Bucy III, in House District 136, and Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, fell to Democrat Vikki Goodwin in House District 47.

Democrat Erin Zwiener beat Republican Ken Strange in the race for outgoing Rep. Jason Isaac's seat in District 45, which encompasses Hays and Blanco counties. And in House District 52, where Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, stepped down, Democrat James Talarico defeated Republican Cynthia Flores.

Population growth and demographic changes in Williamson and Hays counties, driven in part by Austin residents moving to suburbs, combined with dissatisfaction with President Donald Trump and enthusiasm for Democratic U.S. candidate Beto O'Rourke helped carry down-ballot Central Texas Democrats to victory.

"The (voter) excitement and the energy and candidates that ran — all of that was conceived out of the Trump victory in 2016, but then after that, you have the Beto phenomenon, and you also had four very different but talented candidates in Talarico, Bucy, Goodwin and Zwiener," said Mark Littlefield, a political consultant who helped with the Talarico, Goodwin and Bucy campaigns.

In total, Democrats flipped a dozen Texas House seats and two Texas Senate seats, but Republicans will still hold a comfortable majority in both chambers.

"The message we put out there appealed to a lot of people who aren't happy with incumbents in general and find that some new people in office would be helpful," Goodwin, who won by almost 5 percentage points, told the American-Statesman.

Zwiener attributed her victory in part to an increase in the number of registered voters and high turnout among people living in the Interstate 35 corridor, where she focused her campaign.

"We knocked on almost 30,000 doors. I personally knocked on over 7,000 of those, and to me that's what made all the difference," said Zwiener, a children's book author. "Folks need to meet a candidate and look them in the eye. They need to know there are real, live human beings on the other end of that ballot."

Zwiener lost in Blanco County but garnered enough votes in Hays to win by slightly more than 3 percentage points.

Teacher support

In Williamson County, Talarico, who also won by just more than 3 points, said independent and split-ticket voters made the difference in his race.

He said the fact he was a public school teacher for two years also helped. Talarico had said he'd vote against plans to spend public money for private school tuition, while Flores had expressed support for voucher-like options for students with special needs.

"I cannot tell you the number of teachers and retired teachers who told me they were lifelong Republicans but they

were voting for me on the issue of public education,” Talarico said. “The future of our education system is on the line in the next legislative session, and that’s much bigger and more important than partisan affiliation.”

At 29, Talarico will be among the youngest members of the Legislature. He will join the House in the coming weeks after he won a separate race Tuesday night to serve out the rest of Gonzales’ term.

In all four Central Texas races, Republicans raised twice as much as Democrats on average this year, and Republicans also received the endorsements of Gov. Greg Abbott.

Suburban shift

The 12 GOP House districts won by Democrats have at least one thing in common: They’re located on the outskirts of Texas’ biggest cities, with Republican representatives also falling in the suburbs of Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth. The two Republican state senators who lost — Konni Burton of Colleyville and Don Huffines of Dallas — also represent districts that include suburbs.

The shift reflects a national trend. Republicans struggled in suburban areas their party once dominated.

It was also an election marked by women winning in races across the country. Nine of the Democrats who prevailed in the 14 Texas House and Senate GOP seats are women.

Democratic gains could affect the agenda for next year’s legislative session. In the House, members will choose a new speaker when they convene in January; a larger Democratic caucus could help the party influence the race.

In the Senate, Democrats fell one seat short of threatening the GOP supermajority, which allows Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, to override Democratic attempts to slow down his agenda through procedural hurdles.

Given Tuesday’s results, Democrats would have had enough votes in next year’s session to force Patrick to negotiate with them had they not lost the September special election for disgraced former Sen. Carlos Uresti’s seat, which Republican Pete Flores won in an upset.

Fueled by suburban gains, Democrats also pick up 2 seats in the state Senate

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Author: Julie Chang and Sean Collins Walsh jchang@statesman.com swalsh@statesman.com Section: TX News | 779 Words

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Democratic gains could affect the agenda for next year's legislative session. In the House, members will choose a new speaker when they convene in January; a larger Democratic caucus could help the party influence the race.

In the Senate, Democrats fell one seat short of threatening the GOP supermajority, which allows Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, to override Democratic attempts to slow down his agenda through procedural hurdles.

Given Tuesday's results, Democrats would have had enough votes in next year's session to force Patrick to negotiate with them had they not lost the September special election for disgraced former Sen. Carlos Uresti's seat, which Republican Pete Flores won in an upset.

Bastrop County helps re-elect John Cyrier

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Author: Brandon Mulder bmulder@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 419 Words

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State Rep. John Cyrier, who represents District 17, which includes Bastrop County, sailed to re-election Nov. 6 with 63 percent support across the five counties in the district.

Cyrier won 33,462 votes of 53,495 cast in Bastrop, Caldwell, Gonzalez, Karnes and Lee counties, according to the secretary of state's office. His challenger, Democrat Michelle Ryan, received 20,033 votes.

Cyrier, however, will find himself in a smaller camp of House Republicans from Central Texas.

Democrat Erin Zwiener took District 45, the district comprised of Hays and Blanco counties and previously held for eight years by Republican Jason Isaac; Paul Workman, Travis County's only Republican representative, lost District 47 to Democrat Vikki Goodwin; Cedar Park Republican Tony Dale was pummeled by Democrat John Bucy III in Williamson County's District 136; and Democrat James Talarico defeated Republican Cynthia Flores to succeed former Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales in District 52 in Williamson County.

But Cyrier, along with state Rep. Terry Wilson, who represents Burnet, Milam and northern Williamson counties, held on. In Bastrop County alone, Cyrier, who lives in Lockhart, earned 15,606 votes, winning 58 percent of the county's electorate. Ryan, who lives in Bastrop, won 11,349 votes in Bastrop County.

"It's a large pendulum swing. The demographics are definitely changing in this area, especially around Austin and in its suburbs," Cyrier said. "I don't know if it's necessarily shocking, or even very surprising, especially with that race Beto O'Rourke ran. It was all about getting out the voters, and that's definitely something that the Democratic Party did."

O'Rourke, a Democratic U.S. representative from El Paso who is credited with energizing young and new voters, fell short of unseating incumbent Republican Sen. Ted Cruz.

Now with fewer Republican colleagues in the state House - Democrats flipped 12 seats on Nov. 6 - Cyrier is preparing for a legislative session with rural interests in mind.

He said he plans to craft legislation that will expand and improve rural broadband, and he'll look for ways to address public school improvements in rural areas, which have needs distinct from those in Texas' metro areas. He'll look to protect his district's groundwater resources, which for the past several years have been targeted by both private water marketers and public utilities, such as the Lower Colorado River Authority.

He said he'll also address the district's growing transportation needs.

"We often get overlooked," Cyrier said. "A lot of (funding) goes into the metroplexes and not into the rural communities. So, I want to continue to fight to make sure that we get our fair share."

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Flannigan, a Democrat and a Williamson County resident, lost that 2014 election to a Republican. But two years later, he ran again for the council and won, even as Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump by 10 percentage points in Williamson County.

On Tuesday, Democratic Beto O’Rourke led Republican incumbent Sen. Ted Cruz by a narrow margin in the county. While Cruz won re-election in the statewide race, O’Rourke’s success in Williamson County garnered attention. It marked the first time since Texas saw a mass exodus from the Democratic Party in the 1980s and 1990s that a federal candidate received the majority of the vote in a county that has for decades been the conservative bright red foil to the midnight blue liberalism in Austin.

To some in Williamson County, O’Rourke’s victory is nothing more than a flash in the pan, one fueled by popular sentiment for a charismatic candidate. But with Austin’s economic boom pricing some residents out of the expensive urban center, sending them to cheaper housing pastures in the northern or southern suburbs, the 2018 general election could signal a change in the political course of the conservative stronghold.

To be sure, Williamson County voters elected a solid-red candidate in Bill Gravell to be their next county judge. There also were at least 11,000 more voters in the county who opted for a straight GOP ticket than backed a purely Democratic one. And most of the county’s voters backed Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick while also favoring Republicans in 11 of 13 local partisan races.

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While the trickle-down effect of a highly appealing candidate such as O’Rourke might have played a role in helping Democrats win in Williamson County, Gilby said she thinks the party’s success derived from a combination of factors.

“When you take everything — the grassroots organizing, the amazing slate of candidates that we had and all these people that feel like they need to speak up, they need to vote and we need to make a change — that’s why we’re looking at blue Williamson County right now,” Gilby said. “It’s like putting together a puzzle and getting that last piece in there, and we’re just getting started.”

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Winds of political change

While on-point campaigns and compelling candidates played a part in the Democrats’ resurgence in Williamson County, outside observers said broad changes to the area’s makeup are generating an increasing wind at the Democrats’ backs.

Since 2010, Williamson County has seen its population grow by about 125,000 people, according to 2017 estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau. In that time, Leander’s population nearly doubled to 49,234, Cedar Park saw its population grow by 55 percent, and about 24,000 new residents came to call Round Rock their home — a 24 percent increase.

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While much of Williamson County’s growth results from people coming from out of state in search of employment opportunities, there also are those leaving Austin behind.

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Education focus of new state Rep. Talarico

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Author: Austin Sanders Round Rock Leader contributing writer | Section: TX News | 667 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Sitting at Star Coffee in Round Rock on the western end of his Texas House District 52, James Talarico explained why he felt optimistic about the upcoming Legislative session.

"I'm a proud progressive," Talarico, 29, said. "But I have worked with people who don't have those values to achieve what's best for Texans my constituents will allow me to use my judgment on every issue to fight for what's best for them."

Ultimately, Talarico said, he felt "blessed to represent" the approximately 181,000 residents that comprise HD 52.

While at McNeil High School, Talarico volunteered for former HD 50 Rep. Mark Strama's 2006 re-election campaign. But it was during Talarico's time at the University of Texas, here he earned a bachelor's degree in government, he got his first real taste of state politics.

Following the Great Recession in 2008, he and his fellow college students were not optimistic about their looming post-college life. At the 81st session of the Texas Legislature in 2009, Talarico helped organize students for marches, meetings and to testify at the Capitol. In 2011, during the 82nd session, Talarico continued his work organizing students.

The year 2011 is remembered grimly by public education activists in Texas. At the legislative session that year, state lawmakers cut \$5.4 billion from public education funding - a cut that education advocates say schools are still feeling today. Although the session was a failure for Talarico's organizing efforts, he walked away inspired to do more to help his community.

"The 2011 session was a real wake-up call for me," Talarico said. "It showed me how much work needed to be done. But sometimes I feel you learn more from your failures, so I was encouraged."

After his experience at the Capitol, Talarico earned an alternative teaching certification through Teach for America and moved to San Antonio where he taught sixth-grade language arts.

Talarico taught at Rhodes Middle School on the west side of San Antonio. The most recent data from the Texas Education Agency shows that Rhodes is composed of roughly 99 percent Hispanic and black students, with nearly 93 percent of its student population economically disadvantaged.

His experience with one student in particular would become a the propellant that would push Talarico into the next phase of his life.

The student came from a troubled background and struggled to succeed in school. Talarico tried to connect with the student, inviting him to a private group where Talarico mentored students called the "lunch bunch." The young teacher said he felt like he was finally making progress with the student.

But the next spring, the student assaulted another student and was removed from the school. Talarico never saw him again.

"What I realized is that his teacher, his school district and his government all failed him," he said. "We all need to take responsibility for that."

After two years in the classroom, Talarico decided he wanted to find a way to improve education for more Texans, so he pursued a postgraduate program at Harvard.

Talarico earned his master's degree in education policy in 2014 and began working for an education nonprofit based out of Houston named Reasoning Mind. The organization wanted to launch a Central Texas region, so Talarico was asked to come on as executive director.

At Reasoning Mind, Talarico helped implement innovative academic programs at all grade levels - including a program that taught algebra to pre-kindergarten students. In 2017, Gov. Greg Abbott toured a kindergarten class at Robertson Elementary School in Round Rock to learn more about a Reasoning Mind early childhood education program that was successful at the school.

Talarico took away a lesson from that day that would compel him to run for office just a year later: "There's not a blue or red way to fix education in Texas; there's only a right way."

Public education has played a big role in his life, Talarico explained, so helping to realize meaningful school finance reform is the primary focus of his legislative agenda in January.

"I'm not interested in moving the ball a few years down the field," Talarico said. "The time is now to get something done."

State Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, recently won re-election

December 19, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: TX News | 749 Words

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State Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, recently won re-election to a 13th term in the House. He won't serve it. Cancer. Pickett, 62, is resigning Jan. 4 to deal with it. He says he's feeling OK.

I've told you about Pickett a few times. In addition to making laws, he's written children's books, is the House's only handgun license instructor and is a car collector who had a 1927 Ford Model T disassembled, brought into his Capitol office and reassembled for display. He's also known for taking his office motif to places where Capitol offices generally don't go: including movie theater and ice cream store décor.

"Oh yeah," it notes on his official House bio, "he plays the drums in a band made up of other state representatives, current and former state employees." That would be the House of Rock 'n' Roll.

Amazon lists two Pickett publications, a diverse duo: "Margo! The Weird Cat!" and "DTPA, agency and intermediary, tenant/landlord relations, laws, rules and regulations." One is a children's book. The other isn't.

And Pickett holds the record for most appearances in one Texas House photo. We'll get back to that.

The Legislature will miss Pickett for a variety of reasons. Legislatively, he's been an important voice on varied topics, including stints as chair of key committees such as transportation, homeland security and environmental regulation.

But those of us who count on legislators for entertainment — including when we laugh with 'em, not just at 'em — will miss Pickett for his important contributions on that front, capped with a crowning (clowning?) achievement that could be accomplished only by somebody with the proper combination of strategic thinking, foot speed, willingness to defy authority and the mind of a middle-schooler.

It happened on Feb. 12, 2013, a date that should live in "famy" (the opposite of infamy) in the storied lore of the Texas Legislature. It was on that day that Pickett accomplished what nobody else thought unattainable, mostly because nobody else ever thought about attaining it.

For Pickett, it was the realization of a goal that first entered his nontraditional mind when he first arrived in House in 1995. Pickett wanted to appear twice — on either edge — of the panoramic photo taken of all 150 members in the House chamber. The shoot involves slow-pan photography, slow enough (two minutes) for Pickett to figure out he could be shot on one side and then run behind the chamber during the slow pan to also be captured on the other side.

Done. The photo has Pickett standing on the left side and sitting at his desk on the right side. "It's just kind of my nature," Pickett told me of why this goal was important to him.

We'd be better off if stuff like this, though tantalizingly pointless, was important to everybody's nature. This was one man's attempt to loosen things up a bit. "We've gotten so anal-retentive the last couple of sessions," he'd said in recounting the escapade.

So that's the kind of whimsy we'll lose with Pickett's exit from the House. The demographic diversity we're losing results from the fact that he's been part of a dwindling breed that once dominated at the Texas Capitol. Pickett is a white male, non-Hispanic, non-Asian Democrat, one of only three of those in the current Texas House. He'll be

replaced in a special election in a district that's about 80 percent Hispanic.

As of now, with two special elections pending to fill vacancies, there will be six white male, non-Hispanic, non-Asian Democrats in the 2019 Texas House. That includes newcomers James Talarico of Round Rock and John Bucy of Cedar Park.

Pickett says his prostate cancer diagnosis came just prior to the 2017 session. Treatment was "somewhat successful, but not 100 percent." Now he's dealing with additional issues, he said. "My body and mind need a break."

Back in 2017 when he showed me the Model T in his Capitol office, I asked Pickett what he had in mind for his office in 2019.

"I don't know," he said. "It will be a surprise."

The sad surprise is that Pickett won't be in the office. Here's wishing him well.

On Thursday, he and his son will take the Model T apart and remove it from that office, part by part. Might be nice if Capitol folks and others, especially those who've enjoyed Pickett's efforts over the years, show up to watch — and maybe help carry out a part or two — to show their appreciation.

And know this: If there's a way to appear twice in an X-ray, Pickett will figure it out.

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State Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso, recently won re-election

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Central Texas House members

January 6, 2019 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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District 17

John Cyrier, R-Lockhart

First session: 2015

Age: 45

Occupation: Business owner

Of note: Cyrier won a special election runoff in 2015 to replace state Rep. Tim Kleinschmidt. Cyrier is a former Caldwell County commissioner and member of the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's executive committee. He has voted to restrict state funds for Planned Parenthood, authorize open carry of firearms and support state spending for border security.

District 20

Terry Wilson, R-Marble Falls

First session: 2017

Age: 54

Occupation: Retired Army colonel

Of note: Wilson defeated Rep. Marsha Farney in the 2016 GOP primary and easily won the general election in the predominantly Republican district. Wilson has supported private school vouchers, outlawing sanctuary cities and limiting property tax growth. Wilson has said his priorities include ending abortion in Texas, eliminating gun regulations that "put law-abiding citizens in danger" and supporting strong border security measures.

District 45

Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood

First session: 2019

Age: 33

Occupation: Children's book author

Of note: Zwiener, who beat Republican candidate and Wimberley school board member Ken Strange in November, has said she would seek to repeal Senate Bill 4, signed into law in 2017, that penalizes local governmental entities that don't cooperate with federal immigration enforcement. Zwiener said she also would support constitutionally mandating that the state's share of public education funding be 50 percent.

District 46

Sheryl Cole, D-Austin

First session: 2019

Age: 54

Occupation: Accountant and attorney

Of note: Cole, a former Austin City Council member, narrowly defeated attorney Chito Vela in the Democratic primary runoff to succeed state Rep. Dawnna Dukes, D-Austin. Cole's priorities include sharing more state resources with local governments, reducing property taxes and restoring state funds to Planned Parenthood. She defeated Republican Gabriel Nila, a Del Valle science teacher, in the general election.

District 47

Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin

First session: 2019

Age: 51

Occupation: Real estate broker

Of note: Goodwin, who beat state Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, in November, said she would support reducing the amount of money property-wealthy school districts such as the Austin district pay to the state in recapture dollars, which helps support property-poor districts. Goodwin said she also wants to expand Medicaid. To pay for her ideas, she has suggested diverting money currently spent on securing the Mexico border, which she said should be a federal obligation, and to force all commercial property owners to pay their fair share in taxes.

District 48

Donna Howard, D-Austin

First session: 2006 (special)

Age: 67

Occupation: Civic leader; former critical care nurse and health education instructor

Of note: During the 2017 regular legislative session, Howard wrote bills that would eliminate the sales tax on feminine hygiene products, diapers and condoms. She also authored bills that would raise the smoking age to 21, authorize 12-month prescriptions for contraceptives and establish an advisory committee focusing on the healthcare of transgender individuals. None of the bills passed.

District 49

Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin

First session: 2017

Age: 45

Occupation: Attorney

Of note: Hinojosa, a former Austin school board member, authored a bill last session that would make it a felony to carry a firearm while intoxicated. The impetus for the bill banning "intoxi-carry" came from concerns among people at the University of Texas over the campus carry law adopted in 2015 that lets students with concealed handgun licenses bring firearms into some public university buildings. The bill never got a committee hearing.

District 50

Celia Israel, D-Austin

First session: 2015

Age: 54

Occupation: Realtor

Of note: Israel focuses on traffic congestion, public safety and voting rights. She has twice authored bills that would create an electronic voter registration system in Texas. Neither attempt advanced out of the House Committee on Elections. Israel is trying again this year.

District 51

Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin

First session: 2003

Age: 47

Occupation: Attorney

Of note: His priorities include small business assistance, housing, education, hunger and health, and environmental issues. Last regular session he authored a bill that would have kept the personal information of a person adopting an animal from a city or county shelter confidential. The bill passed out of a House committee but never reached the floor.

District 52

James Talarico, D-Round Rock

First session: 2019

Age: 29

Occupation: Former education nonprofit executive director

Of note: Talarico has said he would combat any legislation that supports using state money, like vouchers, to help families pay for private school tuition. He also said he would support a constitutional amendment that would force the state to pay 50 percent of the cost of public school funding and eliminate tax loopholes so that commercial property owners pay their fair share in taxes.

District 136

John Bucy, D-Cedar Park

First session: 2019

Age: 34

Occupation: Business owner

Of note: Bucy supports investing more state money in public education, easing traffic congestion in Central Texas and pushing for Medicaid expansion. He defeated state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, in November.

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Capitol art exhibit on gun violence heralds new session

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Author: Renzo Downey rdowney@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 846 Words

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As lawmakers and the public gathered in the Capitol this week to begin the new legislative session, they were greeted by an art exhibit on gun culture in the U.S., featuring an American flag quilt stitched with the names of mass shooting victims, a representation of children's shoes marching toward a disassembled AR-15 and architectural floor plans in the shape of weaponry.

The exhibit, titled "Assemble to Disassemble," runs through Saturday and features work by three artists. Austin artist Lalena Fisher, who organized the exhibit, planned for it to appear during the first week of the 86th legislative session.

"Of course, the legislators are assembling, and to disassemble — it's literally — I'm disassembling a gun," Fisher said, standing beside the exhibit Tuesday along with the other two artists. "We would be disassembling some assumptions that we have about guns and our culture, like guns representing Texas, for example."

The backdrop for the exhibit is the Capitol, where the Republican-dominated Legislature has expanded gun rights for Texans in recent years. Fisher says the exhibit is not anti-gun but hopes to start a conversation to find common ground on gun control.

Fisher said she was motivated to create her portion of the three-part exhibit with representations of a gun, children's shoes and flowers after the March for our Lives protest in Washington.

"It was moving how it was as if the grown-ups weren't doing the job and so young people took it upon themselves, and so I had the idea for this piece as a visual expression of that," Fisher said. "I wanted to have it here at the Capitol."

Her portion was designed specifically for the Capitol Rotunda ground floor. More than 100 paper model children's Mary Jane shoes, a model gun and blossoming paper flowers are cordoned off in the middle of the Rotunda ground floor. The shoes are in a military-style grid marching toward the disassembled gun, Fisher said.

"I just want (lawmakers) to know that it's a widely felt sentiment that we want sensible gun legislation — not anti-gun, just sensible regulations," Fisher said.

Challenging notions

When the State Preservation Board, which approves exhibits in the Capitol, allotted Fisher the Rotunda ground floor, she contacted her friend Mison Kim of Greenville, N.Y., and Naomi Spinak of Bainbridge Island, Wash., whom she met through her aunt.

Kim explored the visual connection she made between the floor plans of government buildings and cathedrals and weapon shapes while researching the aesthetic of power in architectural structures.

"I always believe that people already have their opinion, and whenever they look at something, they're not really trying to change their opinion," Kim said. "I wanted to show them something from two different eras, two different ideas, and bring it up, then maybe they might begin questioning themselves."

Spinak's American flag quilt contains the names of those killed in U.S. mass shootings since the Columbine High

School shooting in 1999 stitched in red against the white stripes. Spinak left the needle and thread pinned into the quilt. The flag's stars are represented as 50 white AR-15s with gun-related English idioms written onto them.

"I think that our attitudes towards guns are deep-seated in America," Spinak said. "Most of those phrases are American phrases; they're not British. They're made in this country, and we're really connected to guns and gun culture."

Capitol visitor James Dillard of Tampa, Fla., called the use of guns in mass shootings horrific but opposed the use of the flag to represent American gun culture.

"The flag stands for freedom, not for a gun. That's not the truth," Dillard said. "It stands for our freedoms that we have, and part of our freedoms is having an ability to have a gun."

Gun legislation

The ground floor of the Rotunda is a main thoroughfare between the Capitol extension, which houses the majority of lawmakers' offices, and the historic structure, which contains the House and Senate chamber.

Fisher said more than 200 people stopped to read description panels on a day when lawmakers, their families and friends and members of the public were packed into the Capitol to view the session's first proceedings. At least 40 people stopped to talk to the artists, including Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, and aides to Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, Fisher said. Gov. Greg Abbott passed the exhibit on his way to the House chamber but did not stop to look.

The State Preservation Board policy requires that exhibits have a legislative sponsor and serve a purpose that benefits the public, and it prohibits their use for campaign, commercial or illegal purposes.

Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, the exhibit's sponsor, said she accepts all exhibits that are not hateful. She hopes House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, will support a bill allowing judges to grant red flag orders, so that guns could be temporarily taken from those deemed a risk to themselves or others, and legislation barring the sale of guns at gun shows without complying with federal background checks.

Abbott released a plan to improve school firearm safety after the Santa Fe High School shooting in May, including a 48-hour reporting period for background checks and research for a red flag policy.

to begin the new legislative session

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Author: Renzo Downey rdowney@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 846 Words

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Julián Castro launches presidential bid - 'Hope can be bigger than fear,' the former San Antonio mayor says

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Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 1362 Words

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SAN ANTONIO — Julián Castro launched his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president Saturday morning in his hometown of San Antonio.

“When my grandmother got here almost 100 years ago, I’m sure she never could have imagined that, just two generations later, one of her grandsons would be serving as a member of the United States Congress and the other would be standing with you here today to say these words: I am a candidate for president of the United States of America,” Castro said.

The crowd of about 2,500 supporters chanted his name, and Castro repeated the declaration in Spanish.

The former mayor of San Antonio was standing in Plaza Guadalupe, nestled in the West Side neighborhood where he was baptized and grew up.

“So many journeys for me and for my family began right here, and today we begin another one,” said Castro, who was joined on stage by his wife, Erica Lira Castro, their daughter Carina, 9, and their son Cristián, 4.

“This is a community built by immigrants. ... Today, this community represents America’s future — diverse, fast-growing, optimistic, a place where people of different backgrounds have come together to create something truly special. And I am proud to call myself a son of San Antonio,” the candidate said.

But, Julián Castro said, he was running for president because the American Dream that made his success possible was becoming harder to achieve.

“Six years ago, I had the honor of standing before the Democratic National Convention. I said then that the American Dream is not a sprint or a marathon but a relay,” he said. “But right now, the relay isn’t working. Today we’re falling backwards instead of moving forward. And the opportunities that made America, America are reaching fewer and fewer people.”

Castro called for Medicare for all, universal prekindergarten, increasing the minimum wage, protecting women’s right to abortion and workers’ right to organize.

“As president, my first executive order will recommit the United States to the Paris climate accord,” Castro said. “We’re going to say no to subsidizing big oil and say yes to passing a green New Deal.”

He said he would finance his campaign “without accepting a dime of PAC money.”

“You give me your support, and I give you my word: I will spend every day working hard to make sure you can get a good job, find a decent place to live, have good health care when you get sick and that your children and grandchildren can reach their dreams, no matter who you are or where you come from,” Castro said. “We have always been at our best when we’re united by something bigger. And in this journey, in the days to come, together we will show that hope can be bigger than fear. That light can be bigger than darkness, and that truth can be bigger than lies.”

‘My hero’

Castro was introduced by his mother, Rosie Castro, a well-known political and civil rights activist in San Antonio, who called him a son of San Antonio, a son of this neighborhood and son of the United States.

Castro's mother was introduced by his twin brother.

"Are you ready to elect a new president in 2020?" U.S. Rep. Joaquín Castro, D-San Antonio, asked the crowd. "Are you ready to elect my brother president?"

Earlier, a series of speakers talked about how Julián Castro's public work had touched their lives.

"This next election won't be about left vs. right, it will be right vs. wrong," said state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, the newly elected youngest member of the Legislature, who taught at a nearby middle school and called Castro "my hero." He praised Castro for his courage as mayor in risking his political capital by spearheading a successful ballot initiative to increase the sales tax to expand prekindergarten programs.

Sandra Contrera said Castro's Pre-K 4 San Antonio program transformed her life and that of her three children.

Carmen Lidia talked about how her life was changed by Café College, a one-stop center providing guidance on college admissions, financial aid and standardized test preparation to any San Antonio student, a program Castro created in 2010.

Ashwani Jain, who worked for Julián Castro as deputy White House liaison at the Department of Housing and Urban Development during Castro's tenure as the department's secretary in the final years of the Obama administration, called Castro his mentor.

Jain said that under Castro's leadership, HUD expanded broadband access in public housing, increased rental assistance, fought housing discrimination and reduced veteran homelessness by half. He said that Castro also inspired and supported his unsuccessful candidacy for Montgomery County Council in Maryland.

Jain offered a litany of things in which "Julián believes" — the free press, universal health care, climate change, LGBTQ rights, public school funding, survivors of sexual assault, not separating children from their parents.

"That's why I believe in Julián," Jain said.

Second tier

Castro has been methodically preparing for the race over the last year. He recently published a book, "An Unlikely Journey: Waking Up From My American Dream."

Castro is not in the first tier of likely Democratic candidates in the polls. He has been eclipsed in the past year by the sudden rise of Beto O'Rourke, the former El Paso congressman whose strong but losing bid to unseat U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, last year vaulted him into that top tier of presidential prospects.

Asked by a reporter after Saturday's event if she thought O'Rourke should also run for president, Castro's mother replied, "No, but that's up to Beto."

Texas Democrats have for years dreamed of one of the Castro brothers running for statewide office, but they took a pass, as Joaquín gained influence in Washington and Julián, who was among those Hillary Clinton considered as her running mate in 2016, set his sights higher.

"My brother doesn't start this race with the biggest name or the biggest bank account; he's never started out as a front-runner," said Joaquín Castro, who is chairing the campaign. "But he has beaten bigger odds than this to succeed."

The odds in what promises to be a packed field are long, but Castro starts with some clear assets that might enable him to stand out even in a crowd.

He may well be the leading Hispanic candidate in the race, a strong draw for an electoral constituency vital to Democratic fortunes, and for a party looking for a ticket that will reflect the nation's changing demographics. As a Texan, Castro could also potentially put the Lone Star state in play in 2020, the dream prize for Democrats and Republicans' greatest nightmare.

As U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who is up for re-election in 2020, said at a joint appearance last week with Cruz at an Austin event sponsored by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation Policy: "As Ted's campaign demonstrates, we are going to have a monumental battle again in 2020. If we lose Texas, we will never elect a conservative president again.

"Texas is going to be that battleground in 2020," Cornyn said.

Perhaps no Democratic candidate could offer a starker contrast to President Donald Trump than a self-effacing, third-generation Mexican-American from San Antonio, the nation's largest majority Hispanic city.

Castro is also, at 44, along with O'Rourke, 46, part of a new generation of candidates trying to break through in a field where the best-known potential candidates are senior citizens. Former Vice President Joe Biden is 76. Vermont's U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders is 77. Massachusetts' U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren is 69. A younger candidate could have great appeal for a party seeking to find an attractive alternative to Trump, who is 72.

Castro's youth also means he could make a run that could be considered a success even if he does not become the nominee, propelling him to the vice presidency or a prominent place in a future Democratic administration, and, if he acquits himself well, positioning him for a future run for the presidency.

On the most basic level, having an identical twin who has had parallel success in politics is a great advantage, providing Castro with the ultimate political surrogate, soulmate and trusted adviser.

The Castros both graduated from Jefferson High School in San Antonio and from Stanford University and Harvard Law School.

In 2001, Julián Castro was elected to the San Antonio City Council. He ran and lost for mayor in 2005, but was elected mayor in 2009 and re-elected in 2011 and 2013.

'Hope can be bigger than fear,' the former San Antonio mayor says

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SAN ANTONIO — Julián Castro launched his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president Saturday morning in his hometown of San Antonio.

"When my grandmother got here almost 100 years ago, I'm sure she never could have imagined that, just two generations later, one of her grandsons would be serving as a member of the United States Congress and the other would be standing with you here today to say these words: I am a candidate for president of the United States of America," Castro said.

The crowd of about 2,500 supporters chanted his name, and Castro repeated the declaration in Spanish.

The former mayor of San Antonio was standing in Plaza Guadalupe, nestled in the West Side neighborhood where he was baptized and grew up.

"So many journeys for me and for my family began right here, and today we begin another one," said Castro, who was joined on stage by his wife, Erica Lira Castro, their daughter Carina, 9, and their son Cristián, 4.

"This is a community built by immigrants. ... Today, this community represents America's future — diverse, fast-growing, optimistic, a place where people of different backgrounds have come together to create something truly special. And I am proud to call myself a son of San Antonio," the candidate said.

But, Julián Castro said, he was running for president because the American Dream that made his success possible was becoming harder to achieve.

"Six years ago, I had the honor of standing before the Democratic National Convention. I said then that the American Dream is not a sprint or a marathon but a relay," he said. "But right now, the relay isn't working. Today we're falling backwards instead of moving forward. And the opportunities that made America, America are reaching fewer and fewer people."

Castro called for Medicare for all, universal prekindergarten, increasing the minimum wage, protecting women's right to abortion and workers' right to organize.

"As president, my first executive order will recommit the United States to the Paris climate accord," Castro said. "We're going to say no to subsidizing big oil and say yes to passing a green New Deal."

He said he would finance his campaign "without accepting a dime of PAC money."

"You give me your support, and I give you my word: I will spend every day working hard to make sure you can get a good job, find a decent place to live, have good health care when you get sick and that your children and grandchildren can reach their dreams, no matter who you are or where you come from," Castro said. "We have always been at our best when we're united by something bigger. And in this journey, in the days to come, together we will show that hope can be bigger than fear. That light can be bigger than darkness, and that truth can be bigger than lies."

'My hero'

Castro was introduced by his mother, Rosie Castro, a well-known political and civil rights activist in San Antonio, who called him a son of San Antonio, a son of this neighborhood and son of the United States.

Castro's mother was introduced by his twin brother.

"Are you ready to elect a new president in 2020?" U.S. Rep. Joaquín Castro, D-San Antonio, asked the crowd. "Are you ready to elect my brother president?"

Earlier, a series of speakers talked about how Julián Castro's public work had touched their lives.

"This next election won't be about left vs. right, it will be right vs. wrong," said state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, the newly elected youngest member of the Legislature, who taught at a nearby middle school and called Castro "my hero." He praised Castro for his courage as mayor in risking his political capital by spearheading a successful ballot initiative to increase the sales tax to expand prekindergarten programs.

Sandra Contrera said Castro's Pre-K 4 San Antonio program transformed her life and that of her three children.

Carmen Lidia talked about how her life was changed by Café College, a one-stop center providing guidance on college admissions, financial aid and standardized test preparation to any San Antonio student, a program Castro created in 2010.

Ashwani Jain, who worked for Julián Castro as deputy White House liaison at the Department of Housing and Urban Development during Castro's tenure as the department's secretary in the final years of the Obama administration, called Castro his mentor.

Jain said that under Castro's leadership, HUD expanded broadband access in public housing, increased rental assistance, fought housing discrimination and reduced veteran homelessness by half. He said that Castro also inspired and supported his unsuccessful candidacy for Montgomery County Council in Maryland.

Jain offered a litany of things in which "Julián believes" — the free press, universal health care, climate change, LGBTQ rights, public school funding, survivors of sexual assault, not separating children from their parents.

"That's why I believe in Julián," Jain said.

Second tier

Castro has been methodically preparing for the race over the last year. He recently published a book, "An Unlikely Journey: Waking Up From My American Dream."

Castro is not in the first tier of likely Democratic candidates in the polls. He has been eclipsed in the past year by the sudden rise of Beto O'Rourke, the former El Paso congressman whose strong but losing bid to unseat U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, last year vaulted him into that top tier of presidential prospects.

Asked by a reporter after Saturday's event if she thought O'Rourke should also run for president, Castro's mother replied, "No, but that's up to Beto."

Texas Democrats have for years dreamed of one of the Castro brothers running for statewide office, but they took a pass, as Joaquín gained influence in Washington and Julián, who was among those Hillary Clinton considered as her running mate in 2016, set his sights higher.

"My brother doesn't start this race with the biggest name or the biggest bank account; he's never started out as a front-runner," said Joaquín Castro, who is chairing the campaign. "But he has beaten bigger odds than this to succeed."

The odds in what promises to be a packed field are long, but Castro starts with some clear assets that might enable him to stand out even in a crowd.

He may well be the leading Hispanic candidate in the race, a strong draw for an electoral constituency vital to Democratic fortunes, and for a party looking for a ticket that will reflect the nation's changing demographics. As a Texan, Castro could also potentially put the Lone Star state in play in 2020, the dream prize for Democrats and Republicans' greatest nightmare.

As U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who is up for re-election in 2020, said at a joint appearance last week with Cruz at an Austin event sponsored by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation Policy: "As Ted's campaign demonstrates, we are going to have a monumental battle again in 2020. If we lose Texas, we will never elect a conservative president again.

"Texas is going to be that battleground in 2020," Cornyn said.

Perhaps no Democratic candidate could offer a starker contrast to President Donald Trump than a self-effacing, third-generation Mexican-American from San Antonio, the nation's largest majority Hispanic city.

Castro is also, at 44, along with O'Rourke, 46, part of a new generation of candidates trying to break through in a field where the best-known potential candidates are senior citizens. Former Vice President Joe Biden is 76. Vermont's U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders is 77. Massachusetts' U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren is 69. A younger candidate could have great appeal for a party seeking to find an attractive alternative to Trump, who is 72.

Castro's youth also means he could make a run that could be considered a success even if he does not become the nominee, propelling him to the vice presidency or a prominent place in a future Democratic administration, and, if he acquits himself well, positioning him for a future run for the presidency.

On the most basic level, having an identical twin who has had parallel success in politics is a great advantage, providing Castro with the ultimate political surrogate, soulmate and trusted adviser.

The Castros both graduated from Jefferson High School in San Antonio and from Stanford University and Harvard Law School.

In 2001, Julián Castro was elected to the San Antonio City Council. He ran and lost for mayor in 2005, but was elected mayor in 2009 and re-elected in 2011 and 2013.

Freshmen Dems poised to make mark

January 13, 2019 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 2126 Words

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"All the freshmen talk about putting Texas first and serving the state and doing what's best for Texans and getting beyond ideology," Talarico said. "It's bringing us back to a more civil kind of politics. ... Our class shares very similar characteristics, and I can't figure out, are we Trump babies, are we Beto babies?"

"You're forged in that fire, and the message that comes out is ultimately more hopeful and more productive and more healing, and I really hope it's going to have an impact on the chamber at large, and I think you're seeing that it feels a little different," Talarico said. "The bathroom bill doesn't have the same momentum it had; you're not hearing about immigration or guns. The fact that school finance is on everyone's lips is I think a direct result of the election results."

Individual freshman legislators do not generally determine the destiny of a session. But, whether it was the tea party surge abating or the blue wave of 2018 rising, a cadre of new arrivals with common purpose can come to define the politics of the biennial gatherings.

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Villalba lost his bid for a fourth term to staunch conservative Lisa Luby Ryan in the March primary. She in turn lost in November to John Turner, the son of a former state legislator and Blue Dog Democratic member of Congress from East Texas, who describes himself as a "center Democrat," and whom Villalba describes as "a very smart, knowledgeable, capable guy" who will ably represent the district.

"There's no way to change so many seats and not see a difference in the way the body as a whole operates," Villalba said. "Couple that with the strong style of leadership you are going to see from (House Speaker Dennis) Bonnen (R-Angleton), and I think there is going to be a very different temperament to the body. It is going to be comprised of people from the center instead of from the far right, which I think we were seeing in the last several sessions."

"How could it not be?" said Terry Meza, a newly elected member of a Dallas County delegation that went from seven Democrats and seven Republicans to 12 Democrats and two Republicans in November.

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'A new ballgame'

The week after the election, Bonnen met with the newly elected House freshmen in the Agricultural Museum room at the Capitol for more than two hours, outlasting all but a couple of the incoming representatives.

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'Change in direction'

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"We turned out in historic numbers, and it calmed down the crazy and that means good things," said state Rep. Celia Israel, the Austin Democrat first elected in Jan. 2014 who was active in helping to elect some of the 10 new Democratic women to the House, which, in Central Texas, include Austin's Vikki Goodwin, who defeated Republican Rep. Paul Workman, and Erin Zwiener of Driftwood, who won an open seat vacated by state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs.

"I'm really excited to have these new people, and I've met almost all of them and they are all of one voice, and they want to go back to their districts and say we moved the needle on public education, but that's not as easy as it sounds," Israel said. "That means new revenue, that means being truthful about our rainy day fund (which she thinks should be tapped). It means being truthful about property taxes. Doesn't mean these new people have to become the experts on public school finance. It means we all have to move as much like a school of fish as possible."

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Dozens march in downtown Round Rock to honor MLK

January 24, 2019 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Ariana Garcia agarcia@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 523 Words

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Even as chilly winds swept through Round Rock on Saturday, dozens of residents marched downtown in remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Round Rock Black History Organization's 32nd annual event, which honors the legacy of the civil rights activist and minister, culminated with a celebration with speakers and performances at First Baptist Church.

The commemorative walk beginning at the McConico Building featured banners and posters with messages of peace. The Hutto High School ROTC Color Guard and drumline from Cedar Ridge High School led the walk.

Mayor Craig Morgan, Police Chief Allen Banks, City Council members, school board members and state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, were among city and state leaders that took their place in the march alongside residents.

Members of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority were among those participating in the march for the first time.

"With the state of the world today, it's important that we teach our children and generations coming up the importance of remembering those who sacrificed their life for our freedom," said sorority member Karen Starks.

"We still need change and so this is just reminder for us all," added sorority member Shuntavia Wimby-LaCour. "Yes, we've come far, but we still have a ways to go. We still have work to do."

City Council Member Hilda Montgomery hosted the program at First Baptist Church, with a theme of "Black Migrations." Montgomery spoke on the thousands of African Americans who migrated from the South to the northern states to escape oppression and seek opportunity.

"We are here to celebrate and honor those that made that transition," Montgomery said. "They had an impact on America by creating urban cultures in all those cities that we now benefit from and by creating a better America for all of us."

Following an invocation, Morgan pointed out the importance today of King's message of compassion.

"What an irony today that on MLK weekend ... we have 800,000 federal employees going without a paycheck," he said. "This is a people issue and it's time that both parties, as MLK said, to do what's right. These are people just like you and me trying to make a living every day and survive."

Morgan said the greatest threat to the nation is divisiveness and that King's message of unity lives on in the Round Rock community.

"I can sit down with my neighbors that may not look like me, may not agree with me, but we can have a conversation and make it right and do what's right and what's best for our community," he said.

Tina Steiner, an English and language arts teacher in the Round Rock school district and board member on the Williamson County Historic Commission, was the event's guest speaker. She encouraged the crowd to follow in King's steps to enact change in the community, whether it be through volunteering, using their voice at city meetings, serving on boards and commissions or voting at the polls.

“Dr. King paved the way for us to have a voice and choice,” she said. “We must work hard to create change, transparency and inclusivity in our community. What are you going to do tomorrow to affect change?”

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McNeil High students walk out on Parkland anniversary

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On the one-year anniversary of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., more than 200 students at McNeil High School walked out of classes Thursday to remember those who died. Many participants also called for stricter gun laws.

“We are not going to just sit here and let legislators ignore the fact that we are dying,” said Isabela Rayos, a senior who was one of the student organizers of the walkout.

Even though other local schools weren’t holding walkouts Thursday, Rayos said, “we organized it despite other people not doing it because we felt like it was our duty. So much of the momentum from last year is gone, and people are just starting to get back to letting shootings happen.”

Rayos was one of several McNeil students, including Maryam Zafar, who gave speeches at the Valentine’s Day event, held on a field at the school, with hundreds of students sitting quietly on the grass and listening.

“A student should not be the thing that’s standing between a shooter and other kids,” Zafar said. “We choose to speak out because others were not given the choice.”

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, a graduate of McNeil High School, also spoke at the rally, saying he was proud of the students for organizing the walkout. He told the students it was up to them and their generation to “redeem the soul of our country and our democracy.”

“You have a moral obligation to do something about this.” said Talarico, who has filed legislation to increase mental health resources in Texas schools.

The Valentine’s Day attack last year at the Florida high school resulted in 17 deaths.

Hundreds of McNeil students walked out of classes last April as part of a string of student-led protests across the United States that called for stricter gun laws.

At the beginning of the walkout, Rayos passed out to students the names of 119 people killed in school shootings in the United States since 1999. She then read the names aloud.

Another student at the event, Larissa Marks, said threats made against McCallum High School this week brought the shooting issue closer to home. Police arrested a McCallum student Wednesday for making a terroristic threat, and police said they were still searching Thursday for the people who made additional threats on social media.

“I have a lot of friends that go to McCallum, and it’s really scary to know this problem is still prevalent and that my friends — people that are close to me — could be affected because last year it felt more like a movement of solidarity for the Parkland kids,” Marks said.

“It’s close to home and it could happen to me and could very well happen to my friends. ... It’s scary and it’s heartbreaking there are politicians getting money who don’t care about us.”

Bills surface as Austin weighs new sex ed plans - Senate bill calls for state education chief to clear each district's standards

February 23, 2019 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Melissa B. Taboada mtaboada@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 699 Words

Page: A1

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As the Austin school board leans toward approving proposed changes to the district's sex education curriculum, two bills have surfaced in the Legislature suggesting what should be taught on the topic in public schools.

A majority of the trustees appear to be in favor of the new standards, which include introducing lessons to elementary-age students about sexual orientation, gender identity and sexually transmitted diseases. The district is revamping its curriculum for elementary students for the first time in a decade and also making the first revisions for middle-schoolers since 2012. On Monday night, trustees are expected to approve the standards that will be used to create the revised curriculum.

Texas lawmakers, meanwhile, hope to make their own revisions to sex education.

Senate Bill 784, filed by state Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, would require the Texas education commissioner to review districts' sex ed curriculum to ensure it complies with state law and also would mandate that districts send parents that curriculum by mail or email.

Current law requires districts to send a notice about the curriculum and make it available to parents who wish to review it.

"It is not appropriate for any school district to push a sexualized agenda on elementary school children," said David Walls, vice president of the conservative religious advocacy group Texas Values and an Austin school district parent. "Austin parents are furious over this process, the lack of transparency and the radical nature of this agenda. Austin ISD should be focused on real education by partnering with parents, not forcing propaganda on our children."

While not directly addressing whether Austin's proposed curriculum changes were the reason behind the bill, Hughes said the bill promotes transparency in what schools are teaching.

"Parents are concerned about the content of human sexuality instruction in some of our schools and a lack of transparency in reviewing, adopting and implementing the curriculum," Hughes said.

"Our bill would require school districts to share all of the course material with parents and not just a vague summary. It would also establish oversight procedures to hold districts accountable when information-sharing and course content does not comply with state law."

Some Austin parents have pushed back against the Austin district's adoption of the proposed new standards, saying the additional material is inappropriate, particularly for younger children. Proponents of the new material said the district needs a more comprehensive sex education curriculum, one that should also address the needs and questions of LGBT students.

"This is just another bureaucratic obstacle that would make it harder for schools to teach sex ed at all," said Dan Quinn of the Texas Freedom Network, a liberal watchdog group. "It'd be very burdensome. It'd be very expensive. The commissioner would have to review their curriculum. This is a good way just to kill sex education."

Another bill, House Bill 2161, filed by Reps. Sheryl Cole, D-Austin and James Talarico, D-Round Rock, works to put more comprehensive sex education that is medically accurate and age appropriate into Texas schools.

The bill requires the creation of a human sexuality courses in grades specified by the State Board of Education.

“The students of Texas deserve comprehensive sex ed,” Cole said. “Unfortunately, Texas consistently has one of the highest teen birth rates and repeat teen birth rates in the nation, a statistic that certainly is not helped by our failure to properly educate our kids. I am proud to stand with Rep. Talarico and work toward age-appropriate solutions to better prepare our students with reality.”

The bill was brought to the offices of Cole and Talarico by high school seniors who asked their representatives to address “deficiencies” they saw in current curricula taught in Texas classrooms.

In Texas, a quarter of school districts don’t teach sex education.

Of those that do, 58 percent teach abstinence alone.

The Austin school district is among about 17 percent of the Texas districts that teach “abstinence-plus” programs, which include information about contraceptives.

Austin district officials said however state law reads, the district will comply.

School board members also will vote again on the actual sex education curriculum once it is developed.

“We’re still committed to moving forward with our Human Sexuality and Responsibility curriculum process, but we will follow the law,” Austin school district spokeswoman Cristina Nguyen said.

Civics education legislation is important for the future of Texas

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Author: David Thomason and Jamie Carroll | Section: TX Opinion | 545 Words

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We suggest Texas civics education is about promoting the values of individualism, a spirit of volunteerism and an understanding of the importance of accountability and transparency in our political system.

In a recent Corpus Christi speech, Governor Greg Abbott said we are working on legislation to put “civics education back in our schools to make sure kids learn what Texas is all about.” The Texas that will be carried on to the next generation should include citizens who are ready to tackle challenges in their community, to understand how to work collaboratively with government, and to hold their elected officials accountable to the needs of their community.

With this in mind, we want Texans to consider two bipartisan bills in the 86th Legislature that promote Texas civics education for our future generations. HB 3008 and HB 3009, drafted by Representatives James Talarico (D-Round Rock) and Trent Ashby (R-Lufkin) will build the spirit of individualism, volunteerism, and political accountability and transparency into the curriculum of high schools across Texas. The bills will give schools the option of guiding students on solving real problems in local communities, such as working with local city officials on installing stoplights in front of schools to working with school board members on raising awareness for such issues as suicide, drug addiction, sexual assault and bullying.

Critical to this is that both civics education bills do these things without costing taxpayers additional funds. The bills create a funding source that allows voluntary contributions from individuals, companies, organizations and private sources.

Students are interested in contributing to their communities, but often do not have the opportunity. In Bastrop, high school students realized that most city decisions were made during school hours, when students voices could not be heard. They researched how other areas have dealt with this issue and advocated for a City Youth Advisory Council to ensure students could share their opinions about citywide programming with the city manager and city council.

In other instances, students worked with city and state government to pursue specific causes. Last legislative session, Kealing Middle School students wanted to create more opportunities for domestic violence victims to be able to talk about their abuse in a safe space. They advocated for SB 918, which would require cosmetologists to be trained to recognize signs of domestic violence since beauty parlors can provide a comfortable environment for women. In all these examples, students used their civics training to identify the root cause of an issue and to come up with creative solutions they advocated for at the appropriate level of government. They are, in fact, helping government officials do their job better by providing them with ways to fix community issues.

Texans value our independence, voluntary spirit, and holding those in power accountable and transparent. That is why we should pass civics education bills HB 3008 and HB 3009, which give future generations an introduction to these important values without creating a fiscal impact for taxpayers. The passage of these bills will create memorable civics learning for students and better prepare them to be the engaged citizens we need to lead Texas into the future.

Thomason is an assistant professor of political science at St. Edward’s University. Carroll is a doctoral student at the University of Texas and Texas Advocacy Fellow at Generation Citizen.

Incumbent faces business analyst for council seat - Flores focusing on core city services, while Conklin calls for green initiatives

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An incumbent vying for his second term on the Round Rock City Council is running on a platform focused on core city services, while his opponent is calling for increasing local efforts to fight climate change.

Rene Flores, 54, a commercial banker at Extraco Bank in Round Rock, ran uncontested for the council Place 2 seat in 2016. He succeeded George White, who had served on the council for eight years.

Flores said his experience during that first term will serve the city well as the council tackles the many demands of a quickly growing city.

"Round Rock needs to continue to have solid plans in place as more and more people relocate to our city, and I feel I am well-suited to continue playing a role in moving our community forward," he said.

But Blane Conklin, 48, a senior business analyst for the University of Texas who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, said the council needs better representation.

"I'd be the only person living downtown that would be representing that area," he said, adding that many in his neighborhood often feel overlooked and not heard.

In November, Conklin ran as a Democrat against two Republican opponents in the Williamson County judge race. Conklin said his strong showing in that race - where he received 45 percent of the vote - and support from the community spurred him to run for the council.

While keeping core city services a priority, Conklin said clean energy initiatives can coincide with boosting the local economy and addressing traffic. Those efforts would begin with assessing the city's carbon footprint.

"It has to make financial sense, and it can be good for the economy," he said of any clean energy efforts made by the city. "It could add another sector of jobs to our economy. So we can do all of the above."

Flores has touted the council's efforts in providing a strong local economy, listing the city's efforts in bringing Kalahari Resorts and Convention Center, Nutty Brown Cafe and a large UPS distribution center to Round Rock.

"We have worked hard to provide a strong economic climate for jobs and the business sector," he said. "We are always on the hunt for new businesses that will complement our existing business base."

But Conklin said the successes Flores have touted would have occurred with or without him.

"My question is: What is different because of your presence on the council?" Conklin said. "I expect you will know something is different because I was on the council."

Flores called Conklin's comments misguided, emphasizing how the council decides as a whole how to take action. "The City Council is made up of six council members and a mayor, and we all get one vote," he said.

The Place 2 election is distinct in that both candidates have strong ties to political parties. While Conklin is widely recognized as a Democrat through his run for county judge, Flores' wife ran as a Republican to succeed former

state Rep. Larry Gonzales. Cynthia Flores lost that race to James Talarico, a Democrat.

Conklin said partisanship has been more subdued in past council elections because Williamson County has long been a stronghold for Republicans. But he said that is changing, pointing to gains made by Democrats in November.

"Round Rock is blue. In the last elections, we've seen that," Conklin said.

Conklin and Flores both emphasized that regardless of their constituents' political leanings, they would strive to serve the community as a whole.

"I intend to continue to serve all citizens of Round Rock, regardless of their partisan affiliations, to the best of my ability as I have done since 2016," Flores said.

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I might be overly excited about this, but this particular el

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I might be overly excited about this, but this particular election, which would be Nov. 5 if it happens, undeniably would be special, maybe even better than a Beto election.

Quite simply, Texans would be asked what time it is.

More precisely, the question would involve what time it should be, permanently. And this would be thanks to Rep. Lyle Larson's new twist on an old question: Is it time to stop moving the clocks twice a year? Yes, the San Antonio Republican says, and he wants to let voters choose between permanent standard time or permanent daylight saving time.

In a 133-9 vote (it needed 100 to pass), the House OK'd the proposed constitutional amendment needed to put the time question on the Nov. 5 ballot. (There actually would be two items on the ballot: One being a proposed constitutional amendment allowing the time election and the other being the time election itself. The latter would become nonbinding if the former doesn't win voter approval. Don't worry. It'd be less complicated than I made it sound.) House Joint Resolution 117 now goes to the Senate, where its fate is uncertain. Proposed constitutional amendments do not need the governor's signature.

Though we'd have to await voters' decision on which time to permanently adopt, approval of Larson's plan would guarantee an end to switching the clocks twice a year. The election would not allow the option to vote to continue the current system of semi-annual clock switching. But a voter who favors the status quo could vote against the constitutional amendment allowing the time election. Larson said 21 previous legislative attempts to do away with daylight saving time failed in the past 53 years, often because of disagreement over which time should prevail.

We'd have a permanent time, and Texans — at least those who bother voting in what's usually a low-turnout, off-year election — would decide which time that would be. There is a caveat here: Under federal law, it would take congressional approval for Texas to go to year-round daylight saving time. But Larson said a pending action in Congress would do away with the need for that approval.

House debate on the measure was brief. Rep. John Bucy III, D-Austin, said permanent standard time could be a financial hardship to school districts that would have to turn on the lights for sports practices that would continue after dark. He also cited stats concerning more car wrecks when it gets dark earlier. And he raised a concern about whether, depending what time prevails, Sunday pro football games might begin during church time.

Bucy was among the nine nay votes, as were Reps. Celia Israel, D-Austin, and James Talarico, D-Round Rock.

Prior to the Tuesday vote, Larson told me he envisions robust campaigns if this gets on the November ballot.

"The parent groups are for standard time," he said. "They want their kids who are waiting for the bus (in the morning) for it to be light outside."

Larson also has heard from another demographic in favor of how standard time provides more daylight in the morning. (And don't blame me if you're in this demographic and are insulted by this notion. I just report the news.)

"A lot of the older folks that have contacted our office said they like standard time," Larson said. "They like to go to bed when it's dark, and they like to wake up when it's light."

“Recreational folks,” as Larson, R-San Antonio, calls them, like more daylight for evening recreating.

“I’m agnostic,” he said. “Pick standard or pick daylight. We’ll all adjust. But it’s idiotic for a society as modern as we are that we continue to switch our clocks to try to gain an advantage. It’s the same amount of daylight. Let’s quit switching the clocks.”

Despite his professed agnosticism, I pressed Larson for which time he’d back if this indeed makes it to the ballot. At first, he sounded like the kind of guy who’d want more daylight in the evening.

“I’m as much of an outdoorsman as anybody in the House,” he said. “So I like the idea of spending more time hunting and fishing. But the reality is in the summer months the fish bite better in the morning so if I’d have an extra hour of time to fish in the morning and instead of being dark, it’s light.”

“The reality is that would be better from a fishing standpoint,” he said, adding, “Late in the evening, that’s for consuming alcoholic beverages.”

I’m all for ending the clock-switching. And I’m open to hearing the arguments on both sides prior to picking which time I’d support. But, more than anything, I’d enjoy a campaign about what time we want it to be. Sounds like fun.

The measure now heads across the Rotunda to the Texas Senate. And we all know what killjoys those folks can be. As in the House, it would take the votes of two-thirds of the senators to approve it.

COMMUNITY NEWS IN BRIEF

April 27, 2019 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: TX News | 417 Words

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SOUTHEAST AUSTIN

Westbound Texas 71 at U.S. 183 to be closed

Westbound Texas 71 at U.S. 183 will be closed from 6 p.m. Saturday until noon Sunday to allow for demolition of a bridge at the interchange.

During the closure, traffic on westbound Texas 71 will be diverted onto northbound U.S. 183.

To regain access to 71, drivers will make a U-turn on 183 north of Patton Avenue, and take southbound 183 to the exit for westbound 71.

To accommodate the detour, there will also be a left lane closure on southbound U.S. 183 between Thompson Lane and Patton Avenue.

The closure is expected to affect drivers leaving Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, as well as drivers heading west into Austin from areas such as Bastrop County.

The closure is related to the replacement of several bridges at the U.S. 183 and Texas 71 interchange as part of the 183 South Project.

The bridges are being realigned to accommodate expansion of the 71 corridor.

The new bridges will be taller to reduce the risk of damage from oversized vehicles.

LEANDER

Meet the three finalists for fire chief Sunday

The public can meet the three candidates in the running to be the new chief of the Leander Fire Department from 3 to 5 p.m. Sunday at Pat Bryson Municipal Hall, 201 N. Brushy St.

Attendees will hear brief presentations from each finalist and have an opportunity to ask questions and discuss topics.

Former Chief Bill Gardner retired Feb. 15, and the city announced Assistant Fire Chief Rob Curr as interim chief and hired Strategic Government Resources to oversee the executive recruitment process.

The finalists are Robin Bergerson, a deputy fire chief for the city of Waco; James Self, an assistant fire chief for the city of Arlington; and William Wusterhausen, an assistant fire chief for the city of Round Rock.

Finalists will participate in one last round of interviews next week before a selection is made in May.

WILLIAMSON COUNTY

Rep. Talarico to host town halls across district

State Rep. James Talarico, D-District 52, will host a series of town halls Sunday as he walks 25 miles across the length of the district.

The town halls will be at 11 a.m. at Curb Side Coffee House, 111 W. Second St., Taylor; 3 p.m. at Hutto City Hall, 500 W. Live Oak St.; and the Long Branch Saloon, 107 W. Main St., Round Rock.

He will be joined on the walk by community leaders and advocates.

The walk will be streamed live on Facebook.

American-Statesman staff

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When Dennis Bonnen returned to the Texas House to pick up th

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Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 2338 Words

Page: A14

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When Dennis Bonnen returned to the Texas House to pick up the gavel again after joining Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick at the Governor's Mansion on Thursday to announce major spending deals for improving public education and curbing property tax increases, legislators — Republicans and Democrats — gave him a standing ovation.

In his first session as House speaker, Bonnen, a Republican from Lake Jackson, has brought a hands-on bipartisanship born of the traditions of the House, where he has spent half his life, to help steer the Legislature past the rancor that marked the 2017 sessions and back to the basics of governance.

"My job is to make sure every member has a great session. We deliver successful results, and every member has something they can proudly talk about so they all get reelected. That keeps a Republican majority," Bonnen told the American-Statesman in a wide-ranging interview Thursday.

And there, with stunning simplicity, is the steady-handed House speaker's practical plan for maintaining Republican hegemony in Texas amid the tempest-tossed Donald Trump years that cost the GOP 12 House seats in 2016 and imperil the party's control of the chamber in 2020.

"It's called the incumbent protection plan," observed state Rep. Giovanni Capriglione, a Tarrant County Republican who won his fourth term last fall by nearly 40 points. "At the end of the day, tax cuts, more money for schools, nothing big blew up."

"But then again, it may be out of our hands," Capriglione said of 2020, when "we are going for a ride on probably the biggest presidential election ever in history. The number of Republicans and Democrats and general election voters who have never voted before is going to be crazy through the roof."

"Last November was the first sign of that," he said, with 8.4 million voters in Texas, approaching a presidential turnout. In 2020, he said, "they're expecting 11.5 million people," all the more nervous-making for down-ballot state House candidates with the lost lifeline of straight ticket voting in Texas next year.

The 140-day regular session of the 86th Texas Legislature, which will conclude Monday, might be remembered as the calm between the storms of the 2018 and 2020 elections, both dominated by Trump, the combustible president whose polarizing persona may, more than whatever was or was not accomplished in the session just ending, determine whether Republicans maintain their hold on the Texas House or cede control to Democrats ahead of the crucial session that will draw new congressional and state legislative districts.

If Republicans lose their majority next year, "that could mean two or three less seats in the U.S. House" through redistricting, Rice University political scientist Mark Jones said. "It could mean the difference between having the majority or not having majority in the Texas House during the 2022 to 2030 period."

Monday is known as sine die, a Latin term meaning that the session adjourned with "no appointed date for resumption."

But, Capriglione said, it's the starting gun for 2020.

"It's going full campaign mode pretty soon," he said. "The majority is at risk."

'All politics is national'

The fate of the Texas House is likely to be driven by forces outside Texas.

"I hate it, but all politics is national," said Brendan Steinhauser, a Republican political consultant in Austin.

"People in the Capitol really think that this session is going to matter at least somewhat in the November 2020 election, but I really think that might be wishful thinking and is very optimistic about the attention span we all have as voters," Steinhauser said. "I think the whole election is going to be Donald Trump vs. Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden or Kamala Harris, or whoever it is."

It was all about Trump two years ago and he wasn't even on the ballot, Steinhauser said.

The 2018 results were bracing. Abbott won reelection by about 13 percentage points over an ill-prepared and scarcely funded candidate, former Dallas County Sheriff Lupe Valdez. But U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz defeated Democrat Beto O'Rourke by only 2.6 points, Patrick, who had set the pace for ideological warfare in the Capitol, won by a chastening margin of less than 5 points, and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton won by less than 4 points.

"The results of 2018 suggest that had it not been for straight ticket voting in reliably red rural counties, we'd have a Democratic attorney general and Democratic lieutenant governor," said state Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas.

"I think the elections sobered people up to the idea that the state is center right," and not far right, said state Rep. Poncho Nevárez, D-Eagle Pass, who was named by Bonnen to chair the House Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee.

Democrats are targeting 17 Republican-held seats in which the incumbents won by less than 10 points last year. They must win nine seats to take control of the House.

Dave Carney, Abbott's chief strategist, believes Republicans will be in good shape in Texas in 2020 with Trump and U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, who is already running an aggressive campaign, topping the ticket.

"Cornyn will crush, Trump will win," Carney said. "There's no chance Democrats will take the House. The Republicans, I think, will pick up seats."

He believes a successful session will redound to Republicans' benefit.

"I think there was a broad understanding among party leadership, elected officials, etc., that the best way to defend against the Democrats in 2020 was to ensure that there was good governance during the session," former Texas GOP Chairman Steve Munisteri said.

'In Texas, we solve problems'

How would Bonnen advise members of the Texas House to approach 2020?

"That's simple," he said. "Deliver your message of success."

"I mean, you look at Washington, and then you look at Texas, and in Texas, we solve problems. We bring solutions. And we delivered on them in this session, and we've done that, I think, in a fashion stronger (than has) been done in a long time, and you distinguish yourself with the leadership and success that you've provided this session," Bonnen said.

"Passing school finance reform without a court order is unprecedented," he said. "Every one of the 149 members of the House, myself being the 150th, were a huge part of that. They need to go home and make sure their

constituents know that from the day they arrived for this session, even before, their No. 1 priority was school finance reform.

“And we also did it in a different way. We showed civility and respect every day for each other, which means we’re showing civility and respect for all Texans because the truth of it is, every member out there represents their community. And if you don’t respect them, you’re not respecting the community they represent.

“And that’s how you accomplish unprecedented successes: You show civility and respect, something that’s sadly missing in Washington. And so you present yourself as who you are, which is a Texas legislator, who is different than the broken system we live through in Washington, and you show the difference by your civility, but more importantly, by your accomplishments.”

‘Right speaker for the time’

Bonnen entered a Democratic-controlled House in 1997. At age 24, he was the youngest member.

James Talarico, a 30-year-old freshman representative from Williamson County — who won the seat formerly held by Republican Larry Gonzales, who did not seek reelection, by 3.4 points last fall — is the youngest member of the 86th.

“I picked the perfect time to get here, when the tone is for the most part civil and productive and bipartisan and focused on school finance,” Talarico said.

Bonnen named Talarico, with a background in public education, to the Public Education Committee.

“I’m sure he got a lot of backlash for putting a swing-seat Democrat on a committee like that,” Talarico said. “My entire time here, I haven’t gotten a sense of the speaker’s personal politics. “The fact that we’re moving that historic legislation, and that I’ve been a part of it as a freshman, that I got to help develop that bill from the very early stages, it’s been quite something,” he said. “I think this session has surpassed my expectations.

“When you have a purple state, a competitive state, a swing state, that puts everybody on notice, and people tend to gravitate to the middle.”

Jon Rosenthal, a freshman Democrat from Houston who defeated Republican Gary Elkins, a 24-year incumbent, by 3 points, agreed that Bonnen “has been the right speaker for the time. He was committed to school finance reform.

“I had concerns about Bonnen coming in, but I have grown to really like him,” Rosenthal said.

But he said he and his fellow Democratic freshmen want to press ahead on issues such as Medicaid expansion and “feel like we’re the first step in regaining the majority of the House, and that that’s the way the wind is blowing in the state of Texas.”

“I think that Democrats have looked at this legislative session as just their practice round to their ascension to power in 2020 and feel very confident of their chances in 2020,” said political consultant Luke Macias, whose clients include state Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, and six members of the conservative Freedom Caucus (which Stickland left late in the session). “I think Republicans have operated largely on fear.”

Macias said he thought the House leadership erred too far on the side of caution in avoiding the issues that truly embody the Republican Party platform, which, he said, conservatives run on and should enact while they still have a chance, such as sweeping anti-abortion legislation, no-permit gun carry and restricting the growth in state spending.

But state Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth, a Macias client and member of the Freedom Caucus, said that under Bonnen, “the work is still being done but in a different way,” less noisily from the back mic and more productively

from the front mic.

“The speaker has given everybody a chance to have a voice in the decision making, whether it’s the Freedom Caucus or the far left of the Democratic caucus,” said Krause, who was the House sponsor of the “Save Chick-fil-A” bill, banning local governments from taking “any adverse action” against people or businesses based on membership in, or support for, a religious organization, which was enacted over the protest of Democrats who said it would cloak discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Texans under the guise of religious liberty.

“I think you’d have to ask the members, but I think I’ve done a very fair and good job of not dictating to the members what issues they will bring to the floor. That’s up to the membership,” Bonnen said. “And I think what came to the floor was because the support existed within the membership to get it there. And what didn’t come to the floor was because members didn’t want those issues on the floor, or not enough.

“We have a tight partisan makeup in the House, and we didn’t run over the minority,” he said.

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Bonnen said that he, Abbott and Patrick haven’t always agreed during the session, but they kept their differences out of the limelight. Bonnen’s predecessor, Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, publicly sparred with Patrick two years ago. The two led their chambers to a stalemate on key issues, prompting Abbott to call a special session.

“It’s showing the level of respect we have shown to each other. And more importantly, it shows the level of determination to accomplish these major issues. Because we all three, I don’t know if people fully understood the message — the message wasn’t we’re all going to love each other and agree; the message was we’re here to get big things done. And we know to do big things; we have to get in a room and work and debate and argue and disagree and talk through it. But not then air our laundry out for the world to see. Because then you destroy the relationship of accomplishing major successes. That’s the success,” Bonnen said.

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Through bipartisanship, speaker seeks to secure GOP grip on Texas House

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Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 2338 Words

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When Dennis Bonnen returned to the Texas House to pick up the gavel again after joining Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick at the Governor's Mansion on Thursday to announce major spending deals for improving public education and curbing property tax increases, legislators — Republicans and Democrats — gave him a standing ovation.

In his first session as House speaker, Bonnen, a Republican from Lake Jackson, has brought a hands-on bipartisanship born of the traditions of the House, where he has spent half his life, to help steer the Legislature past the rancor that marked the 2017 sessions and back to the basics of governance.

"My job is to make sure every member has a great session. We deliver successful results, and every member has something they can proudly talk about so they all get reelected. That keeps a Republican majority," Bonnen told the American-Statesman in a wide-ranging interview Thursday.

And there, with stunning simplicity, is the steady-handed House speaker's practical plan for maintaining Republican hegemony in Texas amid the tempest-tossed Donald Trump years that cost the GOP 12 House seats in 2016 and imperil the party's control of the chamber in 2020.

"It's called the incumbent protection plan," observed state Rep. Giovanni Capriglione, a Tarrant County Republican who won his fourth term last fall by nearly 40 points. "At the end of the day, tax cuts, more money for schools, nothing big blew up."

"But then again, it may be out of our hands," Capriglione said of 2020, when "we are going for a ride on probably the biggest presidential election ever in history. The number of Republicans and Democrats and general election voters who have never voted before is going to be crazy through the roof."

"Last November was the first sign of that," he said, with 8.4 million voters in Texas, approaching a presidential turnout. In 2020, he said, "they're expecting 11.5 million people," all the more nervous-making for down-ballot state House candidates with the lost lifeline of straight ticket voting in Texas next year.

The 140-day regular session of the 86th Texas Legislature, which will conclude Monday, might be remembered as the calm between the storms of the 2018 and 2020 elections, both dominated by Trump, the combustible president whose polarizing persona may, more than whatever was or was not accomplished in the session just ending, determine whether Republicans maintain their hold on the Texas House or cede control to Democrats ahead of the crucial session that will draw new congressional and state legislative districts.

If Republicans lose their majority next year, "that could mean two or three less seats in the U.S. House" through redistricting, Rice University political scientist Mark Jones said. "It could mean the difference between having the majority or not having majority in the Texas House during the 2022 to 2030 period."

Monday is known as *sine die*, a Latin term meaning that the session adjourned with "no appointed date for resumption."

But, Capriglione said, it's the starting gun for 2020.

"It's going full campaign mode pretty soon," he said. "The majority is at risk."

'All politics is national'

The fate of the Texas House is likely to be driven by forces outside Texas.

"I hate it, but all politics is national," said Brendan Steinhauser, a Republican political consultant in Austin.

"People in the Capitol really think that this session is going to matter at least somewhat in the November 2020 election, but I really think that might be wishful thinking and is very optimistic about the attention span we all have as voters," Steinhauser said. "I think the whole election is going to be Donald Trump vs. Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden or Kamala Harris, or whoever it is."

It was all about Trump two years ago and he wasn't even on the ballot, Steinhauser said.

The 2018 results were bracing. Abbott won reelection by about 13 percentage points over an ill-prepared and scarcely funded candidate, former Dallas County Sheriff Lupe Valdez. But U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz defeated Democrat Beto O'Rourke by only 2.6 points, Patrick, who had set the pace for ideological warfare in the Capitol, won by a chastening margin of less than 5 points, and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton won by less than 4 points.

"The results of 2018 suggest that had it not been for straight ticket voting in reliably red rural counties, we'd have a Democratic attorney general and Democratic lieutenant governor," said state Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas.

"I think the elections sobered people up to the idea that the state is center right," and not far right, said state Rep. Poncho Nevárez, D-Eagle Pass, who was named by Bonnen to chair the House Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee.

Democrats are targeting 17 Republican-held seats in which the incumbents won by less than 10 points last year. They must win nine seats to take control of the House.

Dave Carney, Abbott's chief strategist, believes Republicans will be in good shape in Texas in 2020 with Trump and U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, who is already running an aggressive campaign, topping the ticket.

"Cornyn will crush, Trump will win," Carney said. "There's no chance Democrats will take the House. The Republicans, I think, will pick up seats."

He believes a successful session will redound to Republicans' benefit.

"I think there was a broad understanding among party leadership, elected officials, etc., that the best way to defend against the Democrats in 2020 was to ensure that there was good governance during the session," former Texas GOP Chairman Steve Munisteri said.

'In Texas, we solve problems'

How would Bonnen advise members of the Texas House to approach 2020?

"That's simple," he said. "Deliver your message of success."

"I mean, you look at Washington, and then you look at Texas, and in Texas, we solve problems. We bring solutions. And we delivered on them in this session, and we've done that, I think, in a fashion stronger (than has) been done in a long time, and you distinguish yourself with the leadership and success that you've provided this session," Bonnen said.

"Passing school finance reform without a court order is unprecedented," he said. "Every one of the 149 members of the House, myself being the 150th, were a huge part of that. They need to go home and make sure their

constituents know that from the day they arrived for this session, even before, their No. 1 priority was school finance reform.

“And we also did it in a different way. We showed civility and respect every day for each other, which means we’re showing civility and respect for all Texans because the truth of it is, every member out there represents their community. And if you don’t respect them, you’re not respecting the community they represent.

“And that’s how you accomplish unprecedented successes: You show civility and respect, something that’s sadly missing in Washington. And so you present yourself as who you are, which is a Texas legislator, who is different than the broken system we live through in Washington, and you show the difference by your civility, but more importantly, by your accomplishments.”

‘Right speaker for the time’

Bonnen entered a Democratic-controlled House in 1997. At age 24, he was the youngest member.

James Talarico, a 30-year-old freshman representative from Williamson County — who won the seat formerly held by Republican Larry Gonzales, who did not seek reelection, by 3.4 points last fall — is the youngest member of the 86th.

“I picked the perfect time to get here, when the tone is for the most part civil and productive and bipartisan and focused on school finance,” Talarico said.

Bonnen named Talarico, with a background in public education, to the Public Education Committee.

“I’m sure he got a lot of backlash for putting a swing-seat Democrat on a committee like that,” Talarico said. “My entire time here, I haven’t gotten a sense of the speaker’s personal politics. “The fact that we’re moving that historic legislation, and that I’ve been a part of it as a freshman, that I got to help develop that bill from the very early stages, it’s been quite something,” he said. “I think this session has surpassed my expectations.

“When you have a purple state, a competitive state, a swing state, that puts everybody on notice, and people tend to gravitate to the middle.”

Jon Rosenthal, a freshman Democrat from Houston who defeated Republican Gary Elkins, a 24-year incumbent, by 3 points, agreed that Bonnen “has been the right speaker for the time. He was committed to school finance reform.

“I had concerns about Bonnen coming in, but I have grown to really like him,” Rosenthal said.

But he said he and his fellow Democratic freshmen want to press ahead on issues such as Medicaid expansion and “feel like we’re the first step in regaining the majority of the House, and that that’s the way the wind is blowing in the state of Texas.”

“I think that Democrats have looked at this legislative session as just their practice round to their ascension to power in 2020 and feel very confident of their chances in 2020,” said political consultant Luke Macias, whose clients include state Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, and six members of the conservative Freedom Caucus (which Stickland left late in the session). “I think Republicans have operated largely on fear.”

Macias said he thought the House leadership erred too far on the side of caution in avoiding the issues that truly embody the Republican Party platform, which, he said, conservatives run on and should enact while they still have a chance, such as sweeping anti-abortion legislation, no-permit gun carry and restricting the growth in state spending.

But state Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth, a Macias client and member of the Freedom Caucus, said that under Bonnen, “the work is still being done but in a different way,” less noisily from the back mic and more productively

from the front mic.

“The speaker has given everybody a chance to have a voice in the decision making, whether it’s the Freedom Caucus or the far left of the Democratic caucus,” said Krause, who was the House sponsor of the “Save Chick-fil-A” bill, banning local governments from taking “any adverse action” against people or businesses based on membership in, or support for, a religious organization, which was enacted over the protest of Democrats who said it would cloak discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Texans under the guise of religious liberty.

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TEXAS HOUSE

October 18, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Races for two-year terms in area districts:

DISTRICT 17

John Cyrier, R (i)

Age: 47

Education: Bachelor's degree in engineering technology, Texas A&M University

Occupation: State representative, commercial construction

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2015. Chair of House Committee on Culture, Recreation and Tourism and Texas Sunset Advisory Commission. Served as Caldwell County commissioner and county judge pro tem, working to improve transportation, overhaul outdated subdivision and development regulations, and promote local business development and job growth. Founded and ran a midsize construction company.

Priorities: "I believe my leadership roles present an important and rare opportunity for our district to have an effective voice in the legislative process and to have a long lasting impact on the state."

Madeline Eden, D

Age: 44

Education: No degree

Occupation: Chief technology officer and software engineer

Experience: More than 30 years working in technology sector. Current chair of Bastrop County Stonewall Democrats and former Democratic precinct chair. Served on board for multiple nonprofit organizations and built voter registration system recommended by Texas secretary of state, Register2Vote.org.

Priorities: Work to eliminate gerrymandering by supporting establishment of an independent, nonpartisan commission for redistricting. Work to implement automatic, online and same-day voter registration. Repeal voter registrar deputization laws, implement universal vote by mail and address statewide reductions in polling locations to "ensure equitable access to the polls." Support legislation for affordable high-speed broadband internet across the state and in District 17.

DISTRICT 20

Jessica Tiedt, D

Age: 34

Education: Did not provide

Occupation: Chief court administrator

Experience: Ten years of technical support working with customers, “from helping people with their MacBooks at Apple to helping Fortune 500 companies with their mobile device management servers at MobileIron.” Chief court administrator for Williamson County Justice of the Peace Stacy Hackenberg.

Priorities: “2020 is a critical year for the state Legislature on many issues, including health care, infrastructure, cannabis and fairly drawn district maps.” Ensure that schools are adequately funded, expand health care and prioritize communities over corporate interests.

Terry Wilson, R (i)

Age: 56

Education: Bachelor's degree in business administration, Texas A&M University; master's degree in strategic logistics plans and management, Air War University

Occupation: State representative

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2017. Serves on House Appropriations and House Higher Education committees. Retired from Army after serving for 30 years, including in leadership positions in Department of the Army. Managed research and developed programs and partnered in systems development with major corporations and universities.

Priorities: Securing the border by banning sanctuary cities and ending “the incentives that encourage illegal immigration.” Eliminating regulations and “gun-free zones” for gun owners. Ending abortion in Texas and reducing government spending and growth. “Enact zero-based budgets for every government agency.”

DISTRICT 45

Carrie Isaac, R

Age: 50

Education: Bachelor's degree, Stephen F. Austin State University; master's degree, Purdue University Global

Occupation: Executive director, Digital Education and Work Initiative of Texas

Experience: Founding member of Hays County Republican Women. Attended last five Republican Party state conventions. Wife of Jason Isaac, who represented District 45 for four terms, and “had an inside view of the legislative process for eight years.”

Priorities: Pass legislation to enact “a strict spending cap at the state level of population growth plus inflation,” pass “constitutional carry” — allowing gun owners to carry concealed firearms without a permit — and abolish all forms of taxpayer-funded lobbying. Support legislation that would “ignore and refuse to enforce” federal statutes or court rulings that “would deprive an unborn child of the right to life.”

Erin Zwiener, D (i)

Age: 35

Education: Bachelor's degree in natural resource conservation, University of Montana; master's degree in creative writing, University of Arizona

Occupation: State representative, author

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2019. Member of House Environmental Regulation and Agriculture and Livestock committees. Founding member of LGBTQ Caucus. Previously worked for conservation and education nonprofits.

Priorities: "I'm running because I believe we can do so much better for Texans and because I believe every Texan should have a voice in the legislative process. Most Texans share my values of healthy communities, inclusivity, and common sense government, but those values aren't evident enough in the Capitol. Texans deserve a great education, affordable health care, equal protection under the law, clean air and water, and safe communities. I fought for this last session at the Texas Capitol, and I will keep fighting next session."

DISTRICT 47

Justin Berry, R

Age: 35

Education: Bachelor's degree in criminal justice, master's degree in leadership and management, Sam Houston State University

Occupation: Austin police officer

Experience: Austin police officer for 12 years.

Priorities: To improve public safety, keep taxes low "through the efficient use of taxpayer dollars" and improve traffic congestion in the district.

Vikki Goodwin, D (i)

Age: 53

Education: Bachelor's degree in business administration, University of Texas; master's degree in public administration, LBJ School of Public Affairs, UT

Occupation: State representative, real estate broker

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2019, small business owner, homeowners association board member and Civic Club board member. Community volunteer for Austin school district, Habitat for Humanity and South Austin Neighborhood Alliance.

Priorities: Public education and public health. Support using the rainy day fund to "keep from cutting these vital services." Focus on environmental, transportation and safety issues. "Next session it will be challenging to pass a balanced budget, and to redraw congressional and legislative district maps. Having an experienced representative will be an incredible benefit to the people of this district."

DISTRICT 48

Donna Howard, D (i)

Age: 68

Education: Bachelor's degree in nursing; master's degree in health education, University of Texas

Occupation: State representative

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2006. Served on House Appropriations Committee the past eight years. Chair of Texas Women's Health Caucus. Member of Chamber of Commerce's Opening Central Texas for Business task force. Member of board of Expanding Horizons Foundation. Previously served on Eanes school board as well as boards of Austin Area Interreligious Ministries (now iACT), Common Cause Texas, Texas Freedom Network and Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Priorities: "I'm running for office to ensure healthy families, equal opportunity and responsible government for all Texans — what I call the 'HER Agenda.' I'm running for another term as representative for House District 48 because there is still much work to be done toward those goals."

Bill Strieber, R

Age: 53

Education: Bachelor's degree in biology, University of Texas-San Antonio

Occupation: Business executive, entrepreneur

Experience: Held many different management and executive positions. Worked with several universities to help develop, market and sell many technological innovations, including biotech, medical device and other early stage technologies. Worked with the assessment of regulatory requirements on the business practices of several Texas companies. Involved in grassroots politics for several decades as a precinct chair, election judge and campaign volunteer.

Priorities: Support legislation to ban camping on all state highway right-of-way property and underneath overpasses. Push for lower property taxes and "lower state spending rather than any tax increases." Support funding schools "based on the student, not the school district. ... I support allowing voter approval on property taxes for any increases at or above 2.5%."

DISTRICT 49

Gina Hinojosa, D (i)

Age: 46

Education: Bachelor's in Plan II honors program and government, University of Texas; law degree, George Washington University

Occupation: State representative, lawyer

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2017. Led efforts in the Legislature to secure more money for schools, enact corporate reform, expand access to women's health and pass public safety enhancements. Vice chair of House Human Services Committee and member of House Defense and Veterans' Affairs Committee. Was president of Austin school board.

Priorities: "We are facing a pivotal moment in our democracy — Texas must redraw maps for legislative and congressional districts that may endure for 10 years. I am running to protect Austin's voice and vote in that process. I am also running to secure our investment in public schools, expand access to health care, and address Texas' outsized contribution to global warming."

Charles Meyer, R

Did not respond

DISTRICT 50

Larry Delarose, R

Age: 82

Education: Did not respond

Occupation: Did not respond

Experience: Honorably discharged from Army. Former disc jockey and newsman at suburban New York radio stations. Former writer and editor at The Associated Press in New York. Former AP broadcast executive for Kentucky and West Virginia. Also worked in financial services in New York.

Priorities: Make sure the state provides greater oversight to ensure safe water quality in Pflugerville. Join Gov. Greg Abbott to make sure Texas "has the tools and resources necessary" to address those experiencing homelessness: "We should not follow the lead of cities like San Francisco."

Celia Israel, D (i)

Age: 56

Education: Bachelor's degree in government, University of Texas

Occupation: State representative, Realtor and small business owner

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2014. Member of House Homeland Security, Public Safety and Elections committees. Vice chair of Texas House Democratic Caucus, overseeing Steering and Policy Committee. Member of Legislative Study Group, Women's Health Caucus and Mexican American Legislative Caucus, and founding member of House LGBTQ Caucus.

Priorities: Continue to work toward passing legislation on public education, criminal justice reform and access to health care. "In my six years in office, I have developed a reputation as a respected leader on elections reform and multi-modal transportation solutions, and I hope to use what I have learned over my tenure to continue working for my constituents down at the Capitol next year."

DISTRICT 51

Robert Reynolds, R

Age: 49

Education: Attended Victoria Community College

Occupation: Transportation management

Experience: Army veteran

Priorities: Work with state agencies "to make sure that veterans have the resources and support that they need." Invest in public education by "working to provide staff, students and parents the resources they need to be successful." Lower prescription costs and provide affordable access to health care. Protect women's access to

health care, such as cervical and breast cancer treatment.

Eddie Rodriguez, D (i)

Age: 49

Education: Bachelor's in government, law degree, University of Texas

Occupation: State representative, vice president of business development at Capstone Title

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2003. Member of House Calendars, State Affairs and Ways and Means committees. Co-founder and chair of House Farm-to-Table Caucus, policy chair of Mexican American Legislative Caucus. Previously served as executive director of Travis County Democratic Party and chief of staff for state Rep. Glen Maxey.

Priorities: Work to restore city of Austin's ability to use powerful tools for preserving affordable housing under Homestead Preservation Act. Address source of income discrimination against individuals who rely on housing vouchers to afford a home for themselves and their families. Collaborate with city and county leaders to provide them tools they need to continue advancing local affordability measures. Continue previous efforts to limit households' property tax obligations to their income and ability to pay. Strengthen state safety net programs, push for Medicaid expansion, support small businesses and working families, and fight against harmful budget cuts to crucial public services, including public education and women's health care.

DISTRICT 52

James Talarico, D (i)

Age: 31

Education: Bachelor's degree in government, University of Texas; master's degree in education, Harvard University

Occupation: State representative, educator

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2019. Member of House Public Education and Juvenile Justice and Family Issues committees. Former public school teacher and executive director of a local nonprofit.

Priorities: "I'm a leader who is focused on building a future where every Williamson County family can get ahead. As a Round Rock native, a former public school teacher, and a state legislator, I'm committed to that future." Pursue policies to keep students and educators safe and healthy while meeting their educational needs. Work to expand Medicaid and "access to affordable health care for every Texan." Work toward rebuilding the Texas economy by providing "well-paying, safe jobs for Texans who need them." Support efforts to create an independent, nonpartisan commission to draw district lines.

Lucio Valdez, R

Age: 54

Education: Studied criminal justice at Wharton County Junior College, military science at U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, anti-terrorism at Naval Postgraduate School

Occupation: Retired police officer

Experience: SWAT team leader. Retired as a sergeant major in the Army after 33 years of service and seven overseas deployments. Former Hutto City Council member. Served three-year term on U.S. Rep. John Carter's

veteran commendation board.

Priorities: Fully fund local police departments, keep human trafficking and drug cartels out of schools and communities, end surprise medical billing, cut and cap property taxes, pass school safety laws and increase funding for women's and children's health care.

DISTRICT 136

John Bucy III, D (i)

Age: 36

Education: Bachelor's degree in liberal arts, Austin College

Occupation: State representative, small business owner

Experience: Member of Texas House since 2019. Chair of Young Texans Legislative Caucus. Serves on House Culture, Recreation and Tourism and Elections committees. Former chair of Williamson County Democratic Party. Served as legislative liaison for Texas Democratic Party County Chairs Association.

Priorities: Work to provide quality public education and access to health care. "We also need to get back to politics as public service, and work on issues that affect our constituents and our region such as traffic, infrastructure, and property taxes." Increase funding for public schools. Raise teachers' pay while expanding services for special education and mental health. Expand Medicaid and lower insurance premiums. "As for COVID-19, we must ensure the budget is not balanced on the backs of Texas families and small businesses by cutting supports and services that are needed now more than ever."

Mike Guevara, R

Age: 46

Education: Bachelor of Arts, MidAmerica Nazarene University, law degree, University of Texas

Occupation: Lawyer

Experience: Worked for former Democratic state Rep. Domingo Garcia in 76th legislative session. Worked for 20 years representing Texas municipalities as consulting and city attorney; drafted hundreds of city ordinances; drafted numerous economic development agreements to bring and keep jobs in represented municipalities; served as council member in Cedar Park for over two years, served on executive committee for Capital Area Council of Governments during the past two years; served on Cedar Park City Council legislative committee during 86th legislative session.

Priorities: Limit government in business "to keep Williamson County and Texas attractive to businesses." Oppose efforts to defund law enforcement. Work to keep businesses open in Williamson County and help some that have closed. Reopen schools during coronavirus pandemic and "support school choice, including vouchers, which would allow families to choose education options if their school district will not reopen campuses."

CEDAR PARK — There is nothing in politics quite like a Trump

November 1, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 2880 Words

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CEDAR PARK — There is nothing in politics quite like a Trump Train, said Mike Guevara, a Hispanic Republican candidate for state representative from Cedar Park, referring to the carnivalesque caravans that, along with boat parades, have revved the Trump campaign's emotional engine, including, on three straight Saturdays in October, in suburban Williamson County.

"I went to UT and I've had season tickets forever, so I've been tailgating forever. It's like tailgating on steroids," said Guevara, who kicked off the last and biggest Wilco Trump Train on Oct. 24 from a strip mall in Cedar Park, clocking 350 vehicles.

Merchandise flew. Fists bumped. Flags billowed. Horns honked. There were heroic banners, like the one with Trump as Rambo: "No Man, No Woman, No Commie Can Stump Him." There were signs for Veterans for Trump, Women for Trump, Latinos for Trump.

"The question might be asked, why would a Hispanic vote for Trump? I don't know why a Hispanic wouldn't vote for Trump," said Guevara, 46.

It comes down to three words, he said: "God, guns and gas."

Guevara, whose grandmother immigrated from Mexico and father was a 41-year veteran of the Dallas Police Department, is city attorney for 16 smaller communities around the state. He stepped down from a seat on the Cedar Park City Council to run for state House District 136.

"You want to talk about the American dream," said Guevara, who sees Trump as the dream's guardian.

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CEDAR PARK — There is nothing in politics quite like a Trump

November 1, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 2880 Words

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"I went to UT and I've had season tickets forever, so I've been tailgating forever. It's like tailgating on steroids," said Guevara, who kicked off the last and biggest Wilco Trump Train on Oct. 24 from a strip mall in Cedar Park, clocking 350 vehicles.

Merchandise flew. Fists bumped. Flags billowed. Horns honked. There were heroic banners, like the one with Trump as Rambo: "No Man, No Woman, No Commie Can Stump Him." There were signs for Veterans for Trump, Women for Trump, Latinos for Trump.

"The question might be asked, why would a Hispanic vote for Trump? I don't know why a Hispanic wouldn't vote for Trump," said Guevara, 46.

It comes down to three words, he said: "God, guns and gas."

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CEDAR PARK — There is nothing in politics quite like a Trump Train, said Mike Guevara, a Hispanic Republican candidate for state representative from Cedar Park, referring to the carnivalesque caravans that, along with boat parades, have revved the Trump campaign's emotional engine, including, on three straight Saturdays in October, in suburban Williamson County.

"I went to UT and I've had season tickets forever, so I've been tailgating forever. It's like tailgating on steroids," said Guevara, who kicked off the last and biggest Wilco Trump Train on Oct. 24 from a strip mall in Cedar Park, clocking 350 vehicles.

Merchandise flew. Fists bumped. Flags billowed. Horns honked. There were heroic banners, like the one with Trump as Rambo: "No Man, No Woman, No Commie Can Stump Him." There were signs for Veterans for Trump, Women for Trump, Latinos for Trump.

"The question might be asked, why would a Hispanic vote for Trump? I don't know why a Hispanic wouldn't vote for Trump," said Guevara, 46.

It comes down to three words, he said: "God, guns and gas."

Guevara, whose grandmother immigrated from Mexico and father was a 41-year veteran of the Dallas Police Department, is city attorney for 16 smaller communities around the state. He stepped down from a seat on the Cedar Park City Council to run for state House District 136.

"You want to talk about the American dream," said Guevara, who sees Trump as the dream's guardian.

Or its undoing, in the view of Maggie Juarez, 20, a student and activist from Pflugerville, both of whose parents came to Texas from Mexico as children and met working at a McDonald's in Austin. Juarez voted Wednesday, not so much for Joe Biden as against Trump.

Trump's election "changed my view on America," she said.

"I've always been an American — in my head I identified as Mexican American, but I was an American, I was part of America," Juarez said. "So for you to turn around and tell me that my lineage, that my people don't belong here, that I don't belong here?"

Guevara and Juarez are two of the 5.6 million Latino citizens 18 and older who were potentially eligible to vote this year in Texas, more than in any state but California.

That's 30% of all eligible voters in Texas, the same share as California. But California is a done deal electorally, the cornerstone of any blue Electoral College majority, while Texas is its opposite number — the bedrock of GOP national fortunes.

Texas voting for a Democrat for a president in 2020 would be as big a political earthquake as California going Republican. Only it might actually happen in Texas on Tuesday, almost certainly with decisive impact. And Biden's margin of victory with Hispanic voters — and the hardiness of Trump's Latino loyalists — could make all the difference.

Latinos in Texas don't vote equivalent to their share of the eligible voting population. In the past decade, they have made up between 17% and 24% of the electorate.

Most polling, which has Biden and Trump within a few points of each other in Texas, has Biden with a range of advantages over Trump among Latino voters, from 18% to 48% in five recent surveys, the wide fluctuation a consequence of different projections of the size and composition of the likely Latino electorate.

According to 2016 exit polls, Hillary Clinton beat Trump by 27 points among Hispanics in Texas — 61% to 34% — on her way to losing the state by 9 points, narrowing what was a 16-point margin in the 2012 presidential election and 12 points in 2008.

“In order for Joe Biden to win Texas he must reach and slightly exceed the water mark set by Hillary Clinton in 2016,” said Jason Villalba, a former Republican state representative from Dallas, who now serves as president of the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation. It commissioned a poll in August, sponsored by The Dallas Morning News, in which Biden was leading Trump by less than 10 points with Hispanics.

Hispanic voters long have been vexed by Democratic expectations that they ought to be a more commanding and cohesive electorate.

Mark Jones, of the Baker Institute at Rice University, which conducted the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation poll, said that “a lot of Latino political elites, academic elites and members of the media tend to look at Latinos through the lens of African American voters,” for whom a sense of collective identity,

and a shared distrust of the Republican Party, trumps individual policies.

Perhaps, said Josh Blank, research director at the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas, it is more useful to liken Hispanics to whites as a group than to Blacks.

“Hispanics may not be as Democratic as you think, but they are about as Democratic as white people are Republican,” Blank said. “That’s really the overarching long-term story here. I think every election there’s a focus on what’s going to happen this cycle and if x million Hispanics vote.”

“What you are really talking about long term is the slow churn of a group that’s predominately Republican, in white voters, that’s being replaced by a group that’s predominately Democratic, at least for now, in Hispanic voters and that’s just going to keep happening,” Blank said.

Range of views

Texas Republicans generally get between 35% and 45% of Hispanic votes — with Govs. George W. Bush, Rick Perry and Greg Abbott all having notched very strong performances. But that’s become tougher as the climate on immigration and border issues has intensified in recent years.

While Trump appears to be doing a little better nationally with Hispanics than he did last time, Austin organizer and activist Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, who founded Jolt, an organization designed to politically activate younger Latinos, predicts that Texas Republicans will suffer lasting damage because of Trump.

“I think their alignment with Donald Trump has hurt their standing long-term with Latinos in Texas,” said Tzintzún Ramirez, who finished third in the Democratic U.S. Senate primary in March. “If you look at the high-water mark for Bush, and for Greg Abbott in 2014, they are not able to achieve those numbers any more in Texas, and I don’t think they ever will.”

“My biggest concern is that the Latino vote is the largest nonwhite voting bloc in this country, and there has not been enough investment early enough in the Latino vote,” she said. “That kind of late investment and outreach

produces poor results. It's incredibly frustrating to be taken for granted when you represent the community that's the key to unlocking the entire political system of Texas and the country."

Independent filmmaker Hector Galan is working on a documentary, "Turning Texas," focused on the response to Trump's election by Tzintzún Ramirez, Juarez — who is a pre-nursing student at the UT-San Antonio, but is taking a break during the pandemic working at two restaurants — and another young Latina.

Trailed by cameraman Matthew Lopez, Tzintzún Ramirez and Juarez set out on a cold, rainy afternoon Tuesday to find some young Latinos identified for them by MiniVAN, the canvassing app used by Democratic campaigns, and urge them to vote.

MiniVAN led them to a cul-de-sac in an affluent western San Antonio neighborhood.

Four doors answered their knocks.

- Door No. 1: They were looking for a young man. An older man answered the door, refused to take their Jolt literature and said he was voting for Trump.
- Door No. 2: Alejandra Telles opened the door a crack and gratefully accepted the literature, complementing them on their civic mindedness on such a raw day. They reminded her to vote — that's their sole mission — without advising her how to vote.

Jolt has both a partisan and nonpartisan component. Here they are acting in their nonpartisan role, with the assumption that most of those they spur to vote will vote Democratic.

But Telles offered a reporter who was tagging along a full inventory of her family's complex political mix.

Telles, a band teacher at Atascosa's Ronald McNair Middle School, she has a toddler and is eight months pregnant. She plans to cast her ballot before early voting ends Friday. She's been an intermittent voter over the years, and she really has yet to decide between Trump and Biden.

"Honestly, I'm back and forth," she said. "I'm not necessarily for one party or the other."

She thinks her husband will probably vote for Biden. She usually consults her sister, an attorney and accountant who worked in Austin before moving back to San Antonio, about whom to vote for.

"My mom is all about Trump, everything Trump," and, she thinks her dad will probably follow suit. Her Mexican-born grandmother from Piedras Negras, who also lives in San Antonio, was all for Trump until he said something that offended her and asked Telles to order her some Bidenwear.

"I like that Trump speaks up," Telles said. "Yes, I find him arrogant; yes, I find that he's an ass. But, at the same token, it seems he puts America first when it comes to other countries."

She finds Biden a bore: "I just think he's going to be like every other president. He's going to abide by what sounds good. He's going to raise middle-class taxes again."

And Telles notes, her aunt, Anna Maria Faria, a former vice chair of the Republican Party of Bexar County, is assistant secretary for fair housing and equal opportunity in the Trump administration.

- Door No. 3: Allison Maldonado and her father, Orlando, are at the edge of their driveway. He is building a fire in the grill.

Maldonado, 19, a freshman at the University of the Incarnate Word in Alamo Heights, with a talent for drawing, is studying 3D animation.

Asked if she follows politics, Maldonado replies: "Not closely, but I'm up to date on what I stand for in terms of which party. I'm mostly liberal, Democratic. I'm not particularly fond of Biden, but he is Democrat."

He'll get her vote. She would have preferred Bernie Sanders but she didn't vote in the Democratic primary.

And Trump?

"I don't think he should be a president, but it is what it is," Maldonado said. "He doesn't know a lot about what's actually going on in America. He just sort of has a rough idea."

She is distressed that what she considers sweeping statements about Muslims and Hispanics find a large and ready audience.

"I know my mom likes him, and her side of the family are all in favor of Trump," Maldonado said. "He appeals to older people who don't want any change at all."

Her father says he would have voted for Biden, but he mistakenly thought he was registered and when he learned he wasn't, it was too late.

- Door No. 4: There is a sign on the door: "No soliciting. We're too broke to buy ANYTHING. We've VOTED. We've found JESUS (God Bless You.) Seriously, unless you're giving away FREE money, or you're a Boy Scout or a Girl Scout, PLEASE GO AWAY. Thank you."

But, Tzintzún Ramirez and Juarez have the name of a young Latino low-propensity voter who lives there, so they knock anyway. They are told he is not home.

Generational differences

Jones, who conducted the National Hispanic Policy Foundation poll, said the closer to the immigrant experience, the more likely a Hispanic voter is to back Biden.

So for example, those with four Hispanic grandparents prefer Biden over Trump by a large margin, while those with fewer Hispanic grandparents only narrowly prefer Biden.

Hispanics who speak Spanish or both Spanish and English at home prefer Biden, while those who exclusively speak English at home narrowly prefer Trump.

"I see our Latino communities very split between Republican and Democrats, and I often see it split along first generation vs. multigenerations," said Larry Gonzales, a former Republican state representative from Round Rock, who works as lobbyist.

"My family is three generations of college degrees. My family is further removed from my grandfather, who didn't speak English, with a third-grade education selling cantaloupes in Pearland, Texas," Gonzales said.

But that man's son, Gonzales' father, went to UT, got a degree in aerospace engineering and worked 43 years at Mission Control.

"We understand the opportunities put in front of us, took advantage of it generationally, have played by the rules and been rewarded," Gonzales said. "I think what you see in a lot of the first-generation folks, they are fighting very hard for that educational opportunity, the DACA, the Dreamers, they are fighting hard, and they see that path through the Democratic Party and not the Republican Party."

But the successful succeeding generations, he said, are teeming with "hard-core conservatives," who followed the

rules and “really want the rules followed.”

“I am surrounded by Hispanics who are avid Trump fans, huge Trump fans,” Gonzales said.

And, Gonzales said he and other Trump supporters did not take offense when Trump, as he did the day he announced his candidacy for president, disparaged Mexicans crossing the border: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

“They know he’s not talking about us, but we know who he’s talking about,” Gonzales said.

Guevara, who is seeking to reclaim the seat that state Rep. John Bucy III, D-Austin, took from former Republican state Rep. Tony Dale in the Beto O’Rourke blue wave that swept over Williamson County in 2018, had a similar take. (Gonzales represented the adjoining House District 52, where Democrat James Talarico won the open seat in 2018 when Gonzales did not seek reelection. Talarico is now being challenged by Lucio Valdez, like Guevara, a Hispanic Republican.)

“You hear these things, these bad things that people say (Trump) says, and I’ve never once felt that it was directed at Hispanics,” Guevara said. “In fact, the exact opposite.”

On his mother’s side of the family, Guevara has a comparable Italian immigrant story.

“I’m a product of the American dream on both sides of my family, of immigrants who came over, didn’t even speak the language,” Guevara said.

“I have an identity as a Hispanic, I mean absolutely I do,” he said. “My dad, 100% Spanish is his first language. And my last name is Guevara. So absolutely, that’s part of my identity.”

“The biggest struggle I think that we come across in that is where or how does that mesh with the identity of being American, and this to me is the most important thing — my identity as an American,” Guevara said. “And my question is, when did being an American, when did patriotism become divisive in this country?”

Gender gap

Notable also in all the Biden-Trump polling is a very distinct gender gap among Hispanics, with Hispanic men, like Anglo men, more likely to back Trump.

If Texas ends up being razor-close, and Trump prevails, Trump’s chemistry with Hispanic males might prove decisive.

Villalba’s theory: “Trump identifies as such a strong candidate. He’s got this very tough guy image, this very macho image, that really resonates with Latino men in Texas who are very focused on being strong, on being tough in the face of adversity, and I think Trump embodied that in maybe a way that Biden does not.”

Dr. John Guerra, the Republican challenging state Rep. Bobby Guerra in the overwhelmingly Hispanic House District 41, based in and around McAllen, explained the gender dynamics that he believes work to the president’s favor in that border district.

“Donald Trump’s policies have really helped a lot of the Latinos/Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley,” John Guerra said. “Males have been brought up that they want to have a good job to provide for their families.”

Despite pandemic setbacks, he said, Trump is still seen as the candidate of work.

And there is nothing in Trump's history or deportment that would discomfit those in more patriarchal settings.

In Hispanic families, Guerra said, "The male is still the one that provides for the family. That is one of the conservative cultural values, and that goes along with a lot of Trump's values."

Even if many Hispanic women might be more liberal in their outlook, Guerra said, when it comes time to vote, couples "come to the polls together and they vote together."

"Mandar," said Juarez, using the Spanish word to command, order or boss, that defines the traditional male role, but, she said, "I feel like with the generations, women have begun to butt heads with Mexican men."

"The machismo has definitely lessened," she said.

But when UT government professor Eric McDaniel created a white masculinity threat index, measuring the extent to which people believe that white males have become a discriminated-against group, and applied it to the results of a June 2020 University of Texas/Texas Politics Project poll, Hispanic men were more likely than white women, Hispanic women or Black men or women to believe that whites and men were discriminated against at higher rates than Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, women, gays, and people who identify as transgender.

Only white men scored higher than Hispanic men on the index, suggesting an identity between Hispanic and white men that might help explain the durability of Trump's appeal.

"The way I view it, Trump has said things about the LGBTQ community, Trump has said things about the Latino community, Trump has said things about the Black community. Trump has said things about women," Juarez said. "So at this point he has essentially blatantly disrespected every community except white men. Voting for him you're voting against every single community that he's attacked."

We say - Last chance to cast your 2020 ballot

November 3, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: TX Opinion | 529 Words

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Now, on Election Day, it's time for all of them to hear from you.

About 57% of Texas voters — a record 9.7 million voters — have already cast their ballots. If you aren't among them, please show up at the polls today.

Clearly the presidential race has captivated the nation's attention. But the general election ballot also contains critical races for Congress, the statehouse, school boards and city halls. Those officials make decisions that directly touch our lives: decisions on tax rates and the programs that get funded, policies on the way communities are policed, plans to deliver the education that students deserve.

The city of Austin ballot also contains Prop A, a permanent property tax hike that would fund a major expansion of public transit, and Prop B, a \$460 million bond for sidewalks and other projects.

The ballot is long, but voting in these races is worth your time.

Be prepared to wait in line today. Extra measures are in place to protect voters and poll workers amid the coronavirus pandemic. And straight-party ticket voting is gone, so voters need to consider each race individually.

The American-Statesman editorial board has made recommendations in select federal, state and local races. A summary is below. Find the full endorsements at statesman.com/opinion/editorials.

You can watch our discussions with the candidates by visiting facebook.com/statesman and clicking on "Videos." You can also find complete elections coverage, including questionnaire responses from candidates in their own words, in the American-Statesman's Voters Guide. Find it at statesman.com/votersguide.

Federal races

President: Joe Biden (D)

U.S. Senate: MJ Hegar (D)

U.S. House District 10: Rep. Michael McCaul (R)

U.S. House District 17: Rick Kennedy (D)

U.S. House District 21: Wendy Davis (D)

U.S. House District 25: Julie Oliver (D)

U.S. House District 31: No recommendation

U.S. House District 35: Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D)

Legislative races

Texas Senate 21: Sen. Judith Zaffirini (D)

Texas Senate 24: Clayton Tucker (D)

Texas House 45: Rep. Erin Zwiener (D)

Texas House 47: Rep. Vikki Goodwin (D)

Texas House 48: Rep. Donna Howard (D)

Texas House 49: Rep. Gina Hinojosa (D)

Texas House 50: Rep. Celia Israel (D)

Texas House 51: Rep. Eddie Rodriguez (D)

Texas House 52: Rep. James Talarico (D)

Texas House 136: Rep. John Bucy III (D)

Travis County races

Travis County District Attorney: José Garza (D)

Travis County Sheriff: Sheriff Sally Hernandez (D)

Travis County Judge: Andy Brown (D)

Travis County Commissioner, Precinct 1: Commissioner Jeff Travillion (D)

Travis County Commissioner, Precinct 3: Becky Bray (R)

Williamson County races

Williamson County Sheriff: Mike Gleason (D)

City of Austin races

Austin Proposition A: Property tax hike to fund Project Connect transit system: Vote FOR

Austin Proposition B: \$460 million bond for sidewalks and other transportation projects: Vote AGAINST

Austin City Council, District 2: Vanessa Fuentes

Austin City Council, District 4: Council Member Greg Casar

Austin City Council, District 6: Council Member Jimmy Flannigan

Austin City Council, District 7: Council Member Leslie Pool

Austin City Council, District 10: Council Member Alison Alter

Austin Independent School District races

Austin ISD Trustee, District 2: John Mckiernan-Gonzalez

Austin ISD Trustee, District 5: Lynn Boswell

Austin ISD Trustee, District 8 (at-large): Leticia Moreno Caballero

American-Statesman Editorial Board

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Democrats fell well short of the party's goal of gaining nine

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Democrats fell well short of the party's goal of gaining nine seats in the Texas House and claiming a majority heading into a pivotal legislative session next year, with redistricting on the agenda.

But the party appeared likely to preserve most of the gains from two years ago, including four seats in Central Texas, among 12 districts across the state that moved from red to blue in 2018.

In Texas House District 47, state Rep. Vikki Goodwin of Austin defeated Austin police officer Justin Berry by 49.3% to 48.3%.

The district stretches across western Travis County, where Goodwin narrowly beat incumbent Paul Workman, an Austin Republican, in 2018.

In Hays County, state Rep. Erin Zwiener of Driftwood defeated Wimberley resident Carrie Isaac by 1 point, 50.5% to 49.5%. The district encompasses Hays and Blanco counties.

"Now it's time to get ready for the 87th legislative session, so that we safely rebuild the Texas economy and continue to fight for public education, affordable health care, and this beautiful slice of Texas we call home," Zwiener said in a statement.

In a note to supporters, Isaac said she was "disappointed in the results, but not beaten down."

"Despite a strong campaign and an incredible avalanche of support from you, our friends and neighbors, our campaign was not successful," Isaac said.

Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock defeated Republican Lucio Valdez, 51.4% to 48.6%.

And Rep. John Bucy III of Austin defeated Republican Mike Guevara, 53.3% to 43.1%.

"I want to thank the voters of House District 136 for their trust in me to continue fighting for all of our families at the Texas Capitol," Bucy said in a statement just before midnight. "My top priorities next session will be to expand Medicaid, protect funding for our public schools and teachers, develop a COVID-19 economic recovery plan for Texas' families and small business, pass criminal justice reform, and expand voting rights for every Texan."

Democrats, GOP each lose a seat

With a couple close races left to count, Democrats gave up one seat. In the northwest Houston suburban District 132, state Rep. Gina Calanni, D-Katy, lost to Republican Mike Schofield, who previously represented the district.

Meanwhile, Republicans appeared to hang on to most of the seats targeted by Democrats. An exception was state Rep. Sarah Davis, R-Houston, who conceded to Democrat Ann Johnson on Wednesday morning.

Democrats had their eyes on winning a majority in the Texas House, which has been controlled by Republicans since 2002. Democrats hold 67 of 150 seats.

During the session scheduled to start in just over two months, state lawmakers will work to redraw the state's

political boundaries using new data from the decennial census. The district lines help determine each party's success in races for the next decade. The Senate also remained firmly under Republican control.

'Work to do'

In a call with reporters Wednesday morning, Gov. Greg Abbott's chief political consultant, Dave Carney, lambasted Democrats for their confidence in making gains in Texas election after election.

"Last night was a perfect demonstration of Groundhog Day here in Texas, where the Democrats spend a year and a half talking about all the great things that are going to happen and cannot deliver," Carney said. "They are so out of touch with what's going on with voters in Texas that I don't think they could win a dog catching race in a competitive district."

Texas Democratic Party chair Gilberto Hinojosa noted that the party "has work to do," but remains confident that the Texas will shift to their favor in the future.

"Any pundit who claims 'Democrats lost Texas' can't see the forest for the trees," Hinojosa said in a statement Wednesday afternoon. "We have been making ground year, after year, after year, because we have been fighting for this. Every newly registered, first-time young voter will be even more prepared to vote in the next election."

Other Central Texas incumbents easily held on to their seats. Austin Democratic Reps. Eddie Rodriguez, Celia Israel, Gina Hinojosa and Donna Howard defeated their Republican opponents in their reelection bids.

Republican state Reps. Terry Wilson of Marble Falls and John Cyrier of Lockhart also won reelection.

Once reliably red, Williamson voters back both Biden, Cornyn

November 9, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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For the second time in two years, Williamson County, once regarded as a bulwark for Republicans, voted to send a Democrat to federal office.

Former Vice President Joe Biden won the county narrowly in an election that saw massive turnout across the state. In Williamson County, turnout edged up to 76%, one of the highest turnout rates in the state.

But experts and politicians in the county directly north of Travis County do not see voting trends there as surefire evidence that Williamson County has flipped from red to blue even as the county ping ponged from favoring Donald Trump by nearly 10 points over Hillary Clinton in 2016 to supporting Biden over Trump by 1 point in 2020.

But the political makeup of a county that has seen its population increase 40% in the past 10 years certainly has changed.

“I don’t think anybody can objectively look at Williamson County and say that it is the red bastion that it used to be,” said Round Rock Mayor Craig Morgan. “If I looked at Williamson County as a state, I would say Williamson has become a swing state.”

What happened in Williamson is not isolated. Across Texas, many suburban counties that have been considered reliably red slipped more in favor of Democrats even as the party failed to meet projections of large gains in state and federal congressional seats.

In Collin County just north of Dallas, where Clinton lost to Trump by nearly 17 points in 2016, Trump won by just under 5 points this election. In nearby Denton County, Biden lost to Trump by 8 points — but Clinton got clobbered by 20 points there in 2016.

And the often unpredictable Hays County, which went for Trump by less than 1 percentage point in 2016, this time went for Biden by 11 points.

“I think the Trump elections — I include 2016, 2018 and 2020 — are a unique beast because he is so polarizing,” said Derek Ryan, a Republican consultant and election data analyst in Texas.

The remarkable thing, Ryan said, is that there were often large differences between the share of votes for Trump versus votes for down-ballot Republicans, who more often than not fared better than the president.

Take Sen. John Cornyn, who statewide beat his Democrat challenger M.J. Hegar by 10 points even as Trump bested Biden by about 6 points. In Williamson County, Cornyn actually edged out Hegar by 3 points, though Biden carried the county.

“It’s really interesting that we saw that in some of the down-ballot races, you had Republicans outperforming President Trump by five, six, seven percentage points,” Ryan said.

“In the local area, you look at Williamson County and if you weren’t the president and weren’t under indictment and running, you were all right,” Ryan said, referencing Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody, who was defeated by Democratic challenger Mike Gleason after being indicted in September on an evidence tampering charge connected to the fatal use of force against a man following a police chase.

Cornyn also outperformed Trump in Bastrop, Collin, Denton, Fort Bend and Hays counties.

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, narrowly won reelection in District 52, which includes western Round Rock, Hutto and Taylor. Talarico said that while the political makeup of Williamson County has changed as its population has boomed, he said he also heard anecdotally from several constituents who are traditionally Republican who said they were going to vote for him and Biden.

“The folks that are here are compassionate and logical and empathetic,” Talarico said. “I think the thing that's changed is the politics around them, the Republican Party that most of my neighbors used to support. It's not the same Republican Party.”

Talarico also might have gotten a boost from efforts from Central Texas Interfaith, a network of churches, synagogues and other religious organizations that held its own nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaign.

The group targeted voting precincts with historically low voter turnout and church presence with a phone campaign aimed at individuals the organization identified as low propensity voters. By the end of early voting, they saw marked increases in 16 of the 17 precincts they targeted across the Austin area. Those included Williamson County precincts in Talarico's district as well as State Rep. John Bucy III's district. Bucy, D-Austin, also won reelection Tuesday.

Rev. Miles R. Brandon II, of St. Julian of Norwich Episcopal Church in Round Rock, said many of the people they contacted found it refreshing that they were being asked only to vote and weren't being sold a particular candidate or political party.

“We don't talk to people about candidates, but we talk to them about issues,” Brandon said. “I think, we don't get hung up as much because we don't represent a party or candidate.”

Of the nearly 18,000 people contacted, about 9,500 of them ended up casting a vote by the end of early voting, according to Central Texas Interfaith. Several candidates on the ballot who worked with the network of congregations, including Talarico, Bucy and State Rep. Vikki Goodwin, won their respective races.

At the Williamson County annex in Round Rock on Tuesday, Roy Spencer, 61, had been waving a “I'm Ridin with Biden” flag for roughly eight hours near the voting center. Spencer, who said he voted for Trump in 2016, predicted a landslide for Biden in Williamson County. That ultimately didn't come true — Biden topped Trump by 3,808 votes in a county that cast more than 280,000 ballots — but Trump's image certainly played a role in Spencer's decision to back Biden.

“Trump simply cares about how he looks on television and does not care what is best for the American people. Biden does care and will do what is best for our country first,” he said.

American-Statesman reporter Rebecca Macias contributed to this report.

Suburban swing - Once reliably red, Williamson voters back both Biden, Cornyn

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State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, narrowly won reelection in District 52, which includes western Round Rock, Hutto and Taylor. Talarico said that while the political makeup of Williamson County has changed as its population has boomed, he said he also heard anecdotally from several constituents who are traditionally Republican who said they were going to vote for him and Biden.

“The folks that are here are compassionate and logical and empathetic,” Talarico said. “I think the thing that's changed is the politics around them, the Republican Party that most of my neighbors used to support. It's not the same Republican Party.”

Talarico also might have gotten a boost from efforts from Central Texas Interfaith, a network of churches, synagogues and other religious organizations that held its own nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaign.

The group targeted voting precincts with historically low voter turnout and church presence with a phone campaign aimed at individuals the organization identified as low propensity voters. By the end of early voting, they saw marked increases in 16 of the 17 precincts they targeted across the Austin area. Those included Williamson County precincts in Talarico's district as well as State Rep. John Bucy III's district. Bucy, D-Austin, also won reelection Tuesday.

Rev. Miles R. Brandon II, of St. Julian of Norwich Episcopal Church in Round Rock, said many of the people they contacted found it refreshing that they were being asked only to vote and weren't being sold a particular candidate or political party.

“We don't talk to people about candidates, but we talk to them about issues,” Brandon said. “I think, we don't get hung up as much because we don't represent a party or candidate.”

Of the nearly 18,000 people contacted, about 9,500 of them ended up casting a vote by the end of early voting, according to Central Texas Interfaith. Several candidates on the ballot who worked with the network of congregations, including Talarico, Bucy and State Rep. Vikki Goodwin, won their respective races.

At the Williamson County annex in Round Rock on Tuesday, Roy Spencer, 61, had been waving a “I'm Ridin with Biden” flag for roughly eight hours near the voting center. Spencer, who said he voted for Trump in 2016, predicted a landslide for Biden in Williamson County. That ultimately didn't come true — Biden topped Trump by 3,808 votes in a county that cast more than 280,000 ballots — but Trump's image certainly played a role in Spencer's decision to back Biden.

“Trump simply cares about how he looks on television and does not care what is best for the American people. Biden does care and will do what is best for our country first,” he said.

American-Statesman reporter Rebecca Macias contributed to this report.

AS I SEE IT

November 10, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: TX News | 792 Words

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It was opening day for prefilings of bills for the 87th Texas Legislature that begins Jan. 12 somewhere in Austin. Some things are TBD, including where and how the House and Senate will do their thing during a pandemic.

By 4 p.m. Monday, 531 bills, each a brilliant idea in the mind of a lawmaker or lobbyist, had been tossed into the legislative hopper, beginning with one “relating to the statute of limitations applicable to a sexual harassment complaint filed with the Texas Workforce Commission.”

Others included bills concerning “discrimination on the basis of hair texture or protective hairstyle associated with race,” abolishing Confederate Heroes Day, legislating when fireworks can be sold, restoring straight-ticket voting and several others regarding elections.

And, of course, some involving abortion, some involving guns and some involving marijuana.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed one on a topic familiar around here: “Relating to prohibiting law enforcement departments from contracting with television crews to create reality shows.”

The profiling going on Monday involved the state GOP chair’s attempt to profile Democrats as dangerous leftists. He did so in an escalating and potentially fun-to-watch political civil war within the Texas GOP, which, despite the Dems’ darnedest efforts, maintained full and total control of both legislative chambers.

The instigating general on one side of the GOP’s intramural mayhem is retired Lt. Col. Allen West, the still-new chairman of the state party. West, an ousted Florida congressman, apparently was sent to Texas by the political gods to make sure we continue to drift further from bipartisanship in our Texas Capitol.

Background: Last week, Rep. Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, released a list of more than enough House members, including some Dems, needed to make him speaker next year. Current Speaker Dennis Bonnen did not seek reelection to the House this year.

So, one might think, the 87th session could get off to a positive start with a House speaker who’s done whatever it takes to get bipartisan support. So that’s good, right?

It most certainly is not, said West in “Chairman West’s Monday Message for 11.9.20.” Headlined “The Fight for the American Republic,” it began with history lessons involving Benjamin Franklin and continued with West’s recounting of the shenanigans he says led to his ouster from the U.S. House in 2012.

“I know something about voter fraud,” West told us.

“Fast forward to November of 2020, and, here we are again. However, this time, we are witnessing what appears a bloodless coup at the national level, utilizing the tactic of ballot harvesting,” he wrote. “We should not be surprised.”

Let’s pause here for kudos to ex-President George W. Bush for helping the nation move forward by issuing a Sunday statement that said, “The American people can have confidence that this election was fundamentally fair, its integrity will be upheld, and its outcome is clear.”

Back to West and his profiling of Dems as commies. Buckle up and hunker down as the chairman flails away. (FYI, West led an October rally outside the Governor's Mansion complaining that GOP Gov. Greg Abbott has been too restrictive in allowing reopenings during the pandemic.)

"Texas will not allow the undermining of our 'Texas Republic,'" West wrote. "This is why the Republican Party of Texas is perplexed, and will not support, a potential Texas speaker of the House who would seek affirmation from progressive socialist Democrats to attain that position.

"It is utterly absurd and demonstrably idiotic that any Republican would join with Democrats to lead our Republican majority (83-67) Texas state House. Does anyone believe that Texas Democrats will support the Republican Party of Texas legislative priority of election integrity?

"Therefore, let me clearly state this: the Republican Party of Texas will not support, nor accept, state Rep. Dade Phelan as speaker of the Texas House. Texas does not need a Republican political traitor, not at a time when the two diverging philosophies of governance are this lucid.

"The Republican Party of Texas will not sit back idly and watch leftist Democrats be placed as committee chairmen who will undermine, kill, our legislative priorities, as happened in the 86th Texas legislative session," West wrote.

One has to wonder if his disdain for bipartisan input extends to the bipartisan panel Phelan announced Monday to figure out how to safely make laws during a pandemic.

Back to the chairman:

"Texas will be led by constitutional conservatives, not middle of the road 'road kill' individuals seeking alliance with Marxist, socialist, leftists. We fought hard in the 2020 election cycle — against massive odds and leftist resources — to retain a strong legislative majority.

"America needs Texas. Texas needs committed, principled, resolute and courageous conservatives who will be the vanguard in saving, protecting, and restoring the American Republic. The fight has been enjoined. Y'all all in?"

Yes, as entertaining spectator sport. No, as healthy bipartisanship.

It was opening day for prefiling of bills for the 87th Texas

November 10, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Filing day means Texas Legislature's next session is drawing near

November 10, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Chuck Lindell clindell@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 889 Words

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Monday marked the unofficial opening of the 87th session of the Texas Legislature as lawmakers began filing hundreds of bills for consideration after the gavels fall on Jan. 12.

The typical first-day deluge of prefiled bills included frequent favorites, ranging from Republican efforts to limit or ban abortion to Democratic hopes of abolishing the death penalty or raising the minimum wage.

There also were several sign-of-the-times bills inspired by the coronavirus pandemic and by protests after George Floyd was killed by a police officer who knelt on his neck on a Minneapolis street in May.

By 5 p.m. Monday, senators and representatives had filed almost 550 potential laws, constitutional amendments and resolutions to hash out during the 140-day session, which begins as always at noon on the second Tuesday in January during odd-numbered years.

Many, many more will be drafted before the bill-filing deadline arrives March 12.

One measure, House Bill 54 by Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, would ban police and sheriff's departments from contracting with camera crews to create reality TV shows.

Last year, Javier Ambler II died after Williamson County deputies used a Taser on him four times in an encounter filmed by "Live PD," a since-canceled reality show. A recent American-Statesman analysis of use-of-force reports showed that violent encounters between Williamson County sheriff's deputies and civilians nearly doubled in the year after "Live PD" cameras began following deputies.

With a nod toward Floyd, who was buried in June in his hometown of Houston, three Democratic bills would prohibit police officers from using chokeholds that impede breathing "by applying pressure to the person's throat or neck or by blocking the person's nose or mouth."

Rep. Senfronia Thompson and Sen. Borris Miles, both Democrats from Houston, proposed bills requiring police officers to intervene if they see another officer using excessive force.

Miles and Rep. Terry Meza, D-Irving, also would ban police from firing into fleeing vehicles unless they reasonably believe the action was needed to protect the officer or another person.

Guns, 'red flag' laws

Guns were, as usual, a popular topic.

Rep. Drew Springer, R-Muenster, hopes to allow handguns to be carried without obtaining a state-issued license to carry.

Rep. Valoree Swanson, R-Spring, would let school marshals carry weapons when they interact with students, eliminating a requirement that firearms be kept in a locked safe while roaming the halls or classrooms. A similar bill fell short in 2019.

Several Democratic bills sought to create "red-flag" laws that would let family and law enforcement petition a court

for the temporary removal of firearms from someone deemed to be a danger to themselves or others.

Similar legislation was declared dead on arrival in 2019 by Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Republican who presides over the Texas Senate. In the upcoming session, Rep. Briscoe Cain, R-Deer Park, hopes to go one better — filling a bill that would expressly ban red-flag laws in Texas.

Pandemic response

The pandemic, and health care in general, was on more than a few minds.

Democrats filed more than a dozen bills to expand Medicaid health benefits, particularly for children and new mothers, and expand access to Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

Several Democrats, including Rep. John Bucy III, D-Austin, sought to let any registered voter request a mail-in ballot. Texas law limits mail ballots to those with a disability and those who are 65 and older, in jail or away from their home county; state and federal courts rejected recent efforts to expand vote-by-mail during the pandemic.

Several Republicans had an eye on Gov. Greg Abbott's response to the pandemic, but none more than Springer, who is locked in a Dec. 19 runoff election with Republican Shelley Luther for a vacant Texas Senate seat. Luther gained prominence last spring by defying an Abbott order closing certain businesses, including her Dallas hair salon.

Springer hopes to create an Emergency Powers Board to provide oversight during declared emergencies like the pandemic, including setting expiration dates on a governor's emergency orders.

He also proposed requiring the governor to call a special legislative session if an emergency order lasts longer than three weeks or if requested by two-thirds of the House and Senate during a state of emergency.

Confederacy and more

Reps. Jarvis Johnson and Shawn Theirry, both D-Houston, proposed bills to do away with Confederate Heroes Day as a state holiday celebrated on Jan. 19.

Springer filed HB 311, which would bar the removal of monuments of historic significance — including Confederate memorials and the names of buildings, streets and parks — that have been in place for 40 years or longer. Similar bills sparked sharp disagreements last session.

In other action Monday:

- Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, hopes to allow cities like Austin to once again ban stores from offering single-use plastic bags, while Swanson with the GOP proposed a state law that would void local statutes, like Austin's, that ban the use of cellphones while driving.
- Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, would like to do away with daylight saving time in Texas.
- Several Democrats proposed allowing for online voter registration and expanding the use of medical marijuana.
- Last week, Texas voters participated in the first general election in more than a century without straight-ticket voting. Rep. Art Fierro, D-El Paso, hopes to bring one-punch voting back for 2022 and beyond.
- Fierro also proposed several new state holidays — the day of every statewide primary and general election, and the day after the Super Bowl.

Lawmakers unleash flood of bills - Filing day means Texas Legislature's next session is drawing near

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Author: Chuck Lindell clindell@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 889 Words

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, it seemed like state R

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Author: Nicole Cobler ncobler@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 1750 Words

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, it seemed like state Rep. Dade Phelan was everywhere.

Kathleen Jackson, a member of the Texas Water Development Board, traveled to her hometown of Beaumont and the surrounding area to survey the flood damage after Harvey inundated Southeast Texas in late August 2017. Phelan, a Beaumont Republican with two legislative sessions under his belt, was always two steps ahead of her, meeting with emergency responders and those affected by the devastating storm.

"I was going around to emergency management centers, and either Dade had been there before me or showed up at the same time," Jackson said. "He was out there, boots on the ground, making sure he understood what was actually impacting people at the time."

By the time the Legislature next convened in 2019, Phelan was chairing the powerful House State Affairs Committee and shifted his focus to how the state could better prepare for future storms. He sponsored a relief package that tapped \$1.7 billion from the state's rainy day fund to finance flood mitigation projects. It was approved with broad support from Republicans and Democrats, one of several efforts that earned him a reputation as a legislator who seeks middle ground while listening to all sides of an issue.

Two years later, Phelan, 45, is riding that reputation to control the levers of power in the Texas House, securing an overwhelming majority of support from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle for House speaker.

"The race is over, and the work of the 150 members coming together to serve Texas begins today," Phelan said in a Capitol press conference earlier this month. He declined to be interviewed for this story.

Phelan was born and raised in Beaumont to a prominent family that owns Phelan Investments, a fourth-generation commercial real estate development firm. He worked for then-state Rep. Mark Stiles, D-Beaumont, while attending the University of Texas, where he graduated in 1998 with a bachelor's degree in government and business.

Phelan then worked in Washington as a congressional staff member for then-U.S. Rep. Dick Armye, R-Flower Mound, who helped usher in Republican majorities in both the House and Senate for the first time in four decades and became the majority leader soon after.

Back in Austin, Phelan worked as a legislative staffer for then-state Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, who will now head his speaker transition team.

Capitol insiders say Phelan is a policy wiz. And his background as a staff member helps him understand the ins and outs of the legislative process.

State Rep. Tom Oliverson, a Republican from the Houston area whose district also faced flooding after Harvey made landfall, said he breathed a sigh of relief when he heard that Phelan would lead the flood planning efforts in 2019.

"That issue was very, very sensitive to me," Oliverson said. "I just remember thinking, 'This guy gets it, and this bill is going to pass because he's carrying it.' ... I was just really impressed with his depth of knowledge and the way he conducted himself."

Phelan quickly garnered the support needed to become the next House speaker, less than 24 hours after it was

certain that Republicans would maintain their majority in the House. Since then, Phelan has said he has the support of 57 Republicans and 49 Democrats in the 150-member chamber, although his team has not provided the most recent list of supporters.

“Phelan is a darn good politician because he wouldn’t have been able to do what he did, as quickly as he did, without being a really good politician,” said Bill Miller, a longtime lobbyist and political consultant who works with Republicans and Democrats. “He worked fast and furiously and did a great job.”

GOP crosswinds

Phelan has faced some criticism for garnering support before Republicans could vote on a preferred candidate in a GOP caucus meeting, but it appears unlikely that he’ll face any significant pushback from Republicans. The House will vote on a speaker at the start of the new session Jan. 12.

But Texas GOP Chairman Allen West said the party would not back Phelan for speaker because he is being supported by Democrats.

“It is utterly absurd and demonstrably idiotic that any Republican would join with Democrats to lead our Republican majority,” he said in a Nov. 9 email to supporters. “Texas does not need a Republican political traitor, not at a time when the two diverging philosophies of governance are this lucid.”

West — who was elected by party activists to his post over the summer after railing against Gov. Greg Abbott’s coronavirus restrictions — will not get to vote on the position. Few elected Republicans have publicly backed West on his criticism of Phelan. Previous House speakers have received support from both sides of the aisle.

Newly elected state Rep. Bryan Slaton, R-Royse City, however, accused Phelan of denying the Republican caucus a role in selecting the next speaker.

“Dade Phelan chose to ignore the process and make a move to lock down the vote with half of the Republicans and about half of the Democrats. And when you put this in context of what is going on with the presidential election, it is a move that I believe is bad for the party and bad for Texas,” Slaton said in a lengthy written statement issued Nov. 8.

Luke Macias, a political consultant whose clients have included some of the most conservative state legislators, said West has “given voice to so many in the party who are frustrated by the large amount of influence that Democrats are allowed in the process.”

“Choosing that tactic and bypassing the caucus process has guaranteed him the position but has also brought with it a lot of legitimate criticism and skepticism from any conservative who believes that the November election results give Republicans the numbers they need to pass a Republican agenda,” Macias said. “If the Legislature takes its strong majority and avoids Republican issues, then Allen West’s criticism will be 100% on point.”

But several Republicans, including Abbott, have come to Phelan’s defense. Abbott called him a “strong conservative” a day after West’s comments.

Miller said that West likely was aiming to “put Phelan on a shorter leash,” and he added that House speakers need the support of both parties to have a successful tenure.

“You have to have Democrats to have a successful speaker,” Miller said. “If you try to delineate Republicans and Democrats, it’s a failure in the making.”

Outgoing House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, R-Lake Jackson, agreed that bringing Democratic support on board after receiving overwhelming support from Republicans is “what happens when it’s done the right way.”

Bonnen, facing pressure from his own party after a political scandal damaged his reputation, said last year he would not seek reelection.

"I think they're afraid of actual conservative legislators because it makes them less relevant so they have to become more and more ridiculous," Bonnen said of West and others on the right wing of his party. "It is literally the babbling of an idiot. There is zero concern, there is zero logic, there is zero fact basis to his comments."

In the upcoming session, Phelan will face the always contentious task of redrawing political districts, a budget shortfall and efforts to reform policing after summer protests over the death of George Floyd — all while figuring out how the 150-member body can safely meet during the coronavirus pandemic.

Phelan tapped Oliverson to head a working group of lawmakers who will make recommendations about the best way to meet during the pandemic and how to include the public in the process.

Bipartisan support

Bonnen picked Phelan to chair the House State Affairs Committee, which handles some of the most divisive social issues.

"You want someone that the members trust," Bonnen said. "I knew that on some of these more difficult issues that would fall into more partisan hands, he would be very good at managing those from a conservative perspective but being respectful of the membership, the diverse opinions of the members on the committee and in the House."

Phelan reworked a bill on private companies' employment practices, adding language that would protect local nondiscrimination ordinances for LGBTQ employees.

"It's completely unacceptable," Phelan told The Texas Tribune's Evan Smith last year about legislation that could discriminate against the LGBTQ community. "This is 2019."

However, he has also demonstrated he's a conservative lawmaker who will vote with his party.

Rep. Steve Toth, R-Woodlands, a member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, praised Phelan's voting record on anti-abortion measures and said Phelan was instrumental in passing the so-called "Save Chick-fil-A" bill. The measure prohibits governmental entities from taking "adverse action" against people or businesses based on their membership in, or support for, religious organizations. LGBTQ advocates said the bill was discriminatory.

"I think he's going to do a good job, and the beauty of it is this time the deal didn't come from Democrats," Toth said, referring to former Republican House Speaker Joe Straus' agreement with Democrats in 2009 to oust state Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland, as speaker.

All the while, Phelan has managed to not alienate his Democratic colleagues.

A new group of Democratic House members promoting "women's equity" in the House praised Phelan for agreeing to place women in leadership positions.

Rep. James Talarico, a Democrat from Round Rock, quickly backed Phelan on election night when it became clear that Democrats would not win enough seats to control the House.

"He's got a reputation as an honest broker," Talarico said of Phelan's time chairing State Affairs. "Of course, we as Democrats disagree with some of the policy that came out of that committee, but we're obviously never going to agree with our Republican colleagues 100% of the time."

Talarico, who worked as a middle school teacher in San Antonio, tried to kill Senate Bill 2432, which he said would have "exacerbated the school-to-prison pipeline" by expelling students for saying curse words.

“There wasn’t really a hope in killing it, but I tried my best,” Talarico said. “There was one Republican chairman who stood with me to vote against the bill, and that was Dade Phelan and there was no real reason for him to do that.”

After the session was over, Phelan continued his disaster relief work, aiming to pass Proposition 8. The measure asked voters to amend the Texas Constitution to create a state fund dedicated to large scale flood prevention projects.

He traveled across the state, including to Talarico’s district, to hold town halls with constituents.

“That also spoke volumes about his ability to work with members no matter their party, to be able to travel the state and just know our communities,” he said. “That’s exactly what you want in a speaker.”

The ballot measure passed with 78% of the vote.

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Phelan carries broad support to speaker's chair - Beaumont Republican praised, harangued for working with Democrats

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Author: Nicole Cobler ncobler@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 1750 Words

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, it seemed like state Rep. Dade Phelan was everywhere.

Kathleen Jackson, a member of the Texas Water Development Board, traveled to her hometown of Beaumont and the surrounding area to survey the flood damage after Harvey inundated Southeast Texas in late August 2017. Phelan, a Beaumont Republican with two legislative sessions under his belt, was always two steps ahead of her, meeting with emergency responders and those affected by the devastating storm.

"I was going around to emergency management centers, and either Dade had been there before me or showed up at the same time," Jackson said. "He was out there, boots on the ground, making sure he understood what was actually impacting people at the time."

By the time the Legislature next convened in 2019, Phelan was chairing the powerful House State Affairs Committee and shifted his focus to how the state could better prepare for future storms. He sponsored a relief package that tapped \$1.7 billion from the state's rainy day fund to finance flood mitigation projects. It was approved with broad support from Republicans and Democrats, one of several efforts that earned him a reputation as a legislator who seeks middle ground while listening to all sides of an issue.

Two years later, Phelan, 45, is riding that reputation to control the levers of power in the Texas House, securing an overwhelming majority of support from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle for House speaker.

"The race is over, and the work of the 150 members coming together to serve Texas begins today," Phelan said in a Capitol press conference earlier this month. He declined to be interviewed for this story.

Phelan was born and raised in Beaumont to a prominent family that owns Phelan Investments, a fourth-generation commercial real estate development firm. He worked for then-state Rep. Mark Stiles, D-Beaumont, while attending the University of Texas, where he graduated in 1998 with a bachelor's degree in government and business.

Phelan then worked in Washington as a congressional staff member for then-U.S. Rep. Dick Army, R-Flower Mound, who helped usher in Republican majorities in both the House and Senate for the first time in four decades and became the majority leader soon after.

Back in Austin, Phelan worked as a legislative staffer for then-state Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, who will now head his speaker transition team.

Capitol insiders say Phelan is a policy wiz. And his background as a staff member helps him understand the ins and outs of the legislative process.

State Rep. Tom Oliverson, a Republican from the Houston area whose district also faced flooding after Harvey made landfall, said he breathed a sigh of relief when he heard that Phelan would lead the flood planning efforts in 2019.

"That issue was very, very sensitive to me," Oliverson said. "I just remember thinking, 'This guy gets it, and this bill is going to pass because he's carrying it.' ... I was just really impressed with his depth of knowledge and the way he conducted himself."

Phelan quickly garnered the support needed to become the next House speaker, less than 24 hours after it was certain that Republicans would maintain their majority in the House. Since then, Phelan has said he has the support of 57 Republicans and 49 Democrats in the 150-member chamber, although his team has not provided the most recent list of supporters.

“Phelan is a darn good politician because he wouldn’t have been able to do what he did, as quickly as he did, without being a really good politician,” said Bill Miller, a longtime lobbyist and political consultant who works with Republicans and Democrats. “He worked fast and furiously and did a great job.”

GOP crosswinds

Phelan has faced some criticism for garnering support before Republicans could vote on a preferred candidate in a GOP caucus meeting, but it appears unlikely that he’ll face any significant pushback from Republicans. The House will vote on a speaker at the start of the new session Jan. 12.

But Texas GOP Chairman Allen West said the party would not back Phelan for speaker because he is being supported by Democrats.

“It is utterly absurd and demonstrably idiotic that any Republican would join with Democrats to lead our Republican majority,” he said in a Nov. 9 email to supporters. “Texas does not need a Republican political traitor, not at a time when the two diverging philosophies of governance are this lucid.”

West — who was elected by party activists to his post over the summer after railing against Gov. Greg Abbott’s coronavirus restrictions — will not get to vote on the position. Few elected Republicans have publicly backed West on his criticism of Phelan. Previous House speakers have received support from both sides of the aisle.

Newly elected state Rep. Bryan Slaton, R-Royse City, however, accused Phelan of denying the Republican caucus a role in selecting the next speaker.

“Dade Phelan chose to ignore the process and make a move to lock down the vote with half of the Republicans and about half of the Democrats. And when you put this in context of what is going on with the presidential election, it is a move that I believe is bad for the party and bad for Texas,” Slaton said in a lengthy written statement issued Nov. 8.

Luke Macias, a political consultant whose clients have included some of the most conservative state legislators, said West has “given voice to so many in the party who are frustrated by the large amount of influence that Democrats are allowed in the process.”

“Choosing that tactic and bypassing the caucus process has guaranteed him the position but has also brought with it a lot of legitimate criticism and skepticism from any conservative who believes that the November election results give Republicans the numbers they need to pass a Republican agenda,” Macias said. “If the Legislature takes its strong majority and avoids Republican issues, then Allen West’s criticism will be 100% on point.”

But several Republicans, including Abbott, have come to Phelan’s defense. Abbott called him a “strong conservative” a day after West’s comments.

Miller said that West likely was aiming to “put Phelan on a shorter leash,” and he added that House speakers need the support of both parties to have a successful tenure.

“You have to have Democrats to have a successful speaker,” Miller said. “If you try to delineate Republicans and Democrats, it’s a failure in the making.”

Outgoing House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, R-Lake Jackson, agreed that bringing Democratic support on board after receiving overwhelming support from Republicans is “what happens when it’s done the right way.”

Bonnen, facing pressure from his own party after a political scandal damaged his reputation, said last year he would not seek reelection.

“I think they’re afraid of actual conservative legislators because it makes them less relevant so they have to become more and more ridiculous,” Bonnen said of West and others on the right wing of his party. “It is literally the babbling of an idiot. There is zero concern, there is zero logic, there is zero fact basis to his comments.”

In the upcoming session, Phelan will face the always contentious task of redrawing political districts, a budget shortfall and efforts to reform policing after summer protests over the death of George Floyd — all while figuring out how the 150-member body can safely meet during the coronavirus pandemic.

Phelan tapped Oliverson to head a working group of lawmakers who will make recommendations about the best way to meet during the pandemic and how to include the public in the process.

Bipartisan support

Bonnen picked Phelan to chair the House State Affairs Committee, which handles some of the most divisive social issues.

“You want someone that the members trust,” Bonnen said. “I knew that on some of these more difficult issues that would fall into more partisan hands, he would be very good at managing those from a conservative perspective but being respectful of the membership, the diverse opinions of the members on the committee and in the House.”

Phelan reworked a bill on private companies’ employment practices, adding language that would protect local nondiscrimination ordinances for LGBTQ employees.

“It’s completely unacceptable,” Phelan told The Texas Tribune’s Evan Smith last year about legislation that could discriminate against the LGBTQ community. “This is 2019.”

However, he has also demonstrated he’s a conservative lawmaker who will vote with his party.

Rep. Steve Toth, R-Woodlands, a member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, praised Phelan’s voting record on anti-abortion measures and said Phelan was instrumental in passing the so-called “Save Chick-fil-A” bill. The measure prohibits governmental entities from taking “adverse action” against people or businesses based on their membership in, or support for, religious organizations. LGBTQ advocates said the bill was discriminatory.

“I think he’s going to do a good job, and the beauty of it is this time the deal didn’t come from Democrats,” Toth said, referring to former Republican House Speaker Joe Straus’ agreement with Democrats in 2009 to oust state Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland, as speaker.

All the while, Phelan has managed to not alienate his Democratic colleagues.

A new group of Democratic House members promoting “women’s equity” in the House praised Phelan for agreeing to place women in leadership positions.

Rep. James Talarico, a Democrat from Round Rock, quickly backed Phelan on election night when it became clear that Democrats would not win enough seats to control the House.

“He’s got a reputation as an honest broker,” Talarico said of Phelan’s time chairing State Affairs. “Of course, we as Democrats disagree with some of the policy that came out of that committee, but we’re obviously never going to agree with our Republican colleagues 100% of the time.”

Talarico, who worked as a middle school teacher in San Antonio, tried to kill Senate Bill 2432, which he said would

have “exacerbated the school-to-prison pipeline” by expelling students for saying curse words.

“There wasn’t really a hope in killing it, but I tried my best,” Talarico said. “There was one Republican chairman who stood with me to vote against the bill, and that was Dade Phelan and there was no real reason for him to do that.”

After the session was over, Phelan continued his disaster relief work, aiming to pass Proposition 8. The measure asked voters to amend the Texas Constitution to create a state fund dedicated to large scale flood prevention projects.

He traveled across the state, including to Talarico’s district, to hold town halls with constituents.

“That also spoke volumes about his ability to work with members no matter their party, to be able to travel the state and just know our communities,” he said. “That’s exactly what you want in a speaker.”

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Texas to consider 'Javier Ambler Law'

December 14, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Tony Plohetski Austin American Statesman USA TODAY NETWORK Section: Test | 1082 Words

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Texas lawmakers will consider banning law enforcement agencies from signing up to star on television reality shows — arrangements critics say can cause officers to forsake sound policing and endanger the public for ratings and celebrity.

The proposal, which will be taken up by the Legislature when lawmakers convene in January, is the latest development in the aftermath of the American-Statesman's reporting on the death of Javier Ambler II and its connection to the Williamson County sheriff's office appearances on the now-defunct TV show, "Live PD."

The 40-year-old Black man died on March 28, 2019, after Williamson County deputies chased him for 22 minutes — a pursuit launched because he failed to dim his headlights — and used their Tasers on him four times as he gasped that he had congestive heart failure and could not breathe.

Deputies J.J. Johnson and Zach Camden had crews from the A&E show with them at the time, but the footage never aired.

A Williamson County grand jury indicted Sheriff Robert Chody in September on an evidence tampering charge in the destruction of the "Live PD" video of Ambler's arrest, and voters ousted him from office in November.

A grand jury in Travis County, where the pursuit ended, also is considering evidence tampering charges against Chody and others, including the company that produced the show, and will evaluate early next year whether to indict Johnson and Camden for excessive force.

What is known about Ambler's final moments came from body camera video from an Austin police officer who arrived at the scene.

"When you watch that footage, you can see that those deputies were being more aggressive than they otherwise would have, and that is because they were more interested in boosting their ratings than protecting a citizen," said Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat who proposed the law. "They were more interested in becoming a reality TV show star than serving our neighbors."

House Bill 54, dubbed the Javier Ambler Law, would ban crews from filming "peace officers while acting in the line of duty for the purpose of creating a reality TV show." Other productions, including documentaries or news programs aimed at educating rather than providing entertainment, would not be affected.

Talarico said he believes the bill will draw bipartisan support and that both Republicans and Democrats want Texans to have confidence in law enforcement.

Sen. John Whitmire, a Houston Democrat and the senior member of the Texas Senate, said he will work with Talarico to help get the bill passed.

"There are so many facets of this that beg our response," Whitmire said. "To see the abuse documented is just horrible."

Williamson County participated in the show, as did the El Paso Police Department, during "Live PD's" four-year run. Other featured departments were outside Texas. "Live PD" followed officers as they patrolled or performed other

missions, broadcasting their encounters with the public as they happened to a national audience.

"Live PD" had been a source of controversy for months leading up to revelations about Ambler's death, because of other examples of what experts have said were excessive force and dangerous tactics in Williamson County. Defense attorneys, civil libertarians and others believe that such shows can lead to unfair consequences for people who have not been convicted of a crime, exploit people of color and do little to improve or further the dialogue on policing in America.

Proponents, including Chody, have argued that such shows help in law enforcement recruiting and provide the audience with an intimate view of the dangers and dramas of police work.

Producers canceled "Live PD" two days after the details of Ambler's death sparked national headlines, which also came amid protests across the country in the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the cancellation of the long-running show "COPS." At the time, "Live PD" was one of the highest-rated shows on cable.

Host Dan Abrams said in August that he was in "active and ongoing discussions" about how to revive the series.

In addition to Ambler's death, the Statesman also reported on another Williamson County arrest that was broadcast on "Live PD."

A handful of deputies unleashed a barrage of punches, knee jabs and Taser shocks as Mitchell Ramsey tried to run away from a traffic stop in June 2019. The case remains under investigation by Williamson County prosecutors and the Texas Rangers for possible charges against the deputies.

The newspaper also shined light on a Williamson County SWAT raid that the show's TV cameras filmed to dramatic effect. A SWAT team broke down Asher Watsky's father's front door in May 2019 to arrest the son on a warrant stemming from a fight with his roommate. Watsky had sat peacefully in Williamson County court hours earlier, where deputies could have taken him into custody without fanfare.

"This isn't 'The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,'" said Watsky's attorney, Brad Vinson, who believes his client's arrest was staged for TV. "These changes in legislation are welcome and needed."

Former detectives told the Statesman that they were sometimes instructed to rush investigations and to more quickly seek warrants so that "Live PD" crews could make compelling arrests for the show.

The Statesman also found that car chases, often for minor offenses, and use-of-force encounters increased while Williamson County contracted with "Live PD." An analysis showed that the agency nearly doubled its use of force when cameras started rolling, and that the number of car chases went up 54% when "Live PD" featured Williamson County.

At the time of his defeat in November, Chody remained in a lawsuit with Williamson County commissioners over his participation in the show. Commissioners had voted to end a contract with the production in August 2019 after residents expressed concern. But Chody negotiated his own agreement with producers, which commissioners said was illegal.

The commissioners dropped the suit after Chody's election loss.

Ambler's sister, Kim, said the family approached Talarico soon after they learned details of her brother's death from reporters.

The family of Javier Ambler II, including his mother, Maritza Ambler, and father, Javier Ambler, asked Talarico to file a measure to ban TV reality shows from partnering with Texas police agencies.

Kim Ambler said she and her parents wanted to do something to honor Ambler and have a lasting impact on Texas

law enforcement.

“It means a lot to me and my family,” she said. “I feel like if ‘Live PD’ was not there that day, my brother would be here today. I honestly believe that in my heart. So in order to not have anything like this, we need a law.

“Police work is not entertainment.”

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Texas lawmakers will consider banning law enforcement agencies

December 14, 2020 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Tony Plohetski Austin American Statesman USA TODAY NETWORK Section: Test | 1082 Words

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The proposal, which will be taken up by the Legislature when lawmakers convene in January, is the latest development in the aftermath of the American-Statesman's reporting on the death of Javier Ambler II and its connection to the Williamson County sheriff's office appearances on the now-defunct TV show, "Live PD."

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Texas health officials announced plans Thursday to ship 100,

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Texas health officials announced plans Thursday to ship 100,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to large providers next week, as more than three dozen Texas House Democrats urged Gov. Greg Abbott to overhaul the state's vaccination rollout plan and prioritize teachers, grocery store employees and food service workers.

State health officials said the plan to expand vaccine distribution was the result of surveys with large providers about their ability to operate large, community vaccination sites beginning next week. The Texas Department of State Health Services is expected to publish a full list of sites later this week.

Large and small sites around Texas will receive a total of about 200,000 doses of the vaccine next week, the state health agency said.

The plan for vaccination hubs comes as Democrats raised concerns over the state's vaccination distribution, which has relied on a variety of providers across the state rather than large, more concentrated sites and has left many Texans in the dark about when and where they can get vaccinated.

In a letter sent Wednesday to Abbott and Texas Department of State Health Services Commissioner Dr. John Hellerstedt, state Rep. Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin, and 37 Texas House Democrats cited phone calls from constituents, which they said make clear that the COVID-19 vaccine distribution has become a "source of growing confusion and frustration."

"It is not always clear that the policies that are in place are the ones being implemented: in some cases blind luck or personal connections are supplanting the priorities your office established," the letter read. "Unfortunately, when people contact my office with legitimate questions and concerns about these issues, I do not know what to tell them because the state's plan conflicts with what people are actually experiencing across the state."

Also signing the letter: Austin Reps. John Bucy III, Gina Hinojosa, Celia Israel and Eddie Rodriguez, as well as Erin Zwiener of Driftwood and James Talarico of Round Rock.

The state's vaccine rollout has been slower than expected, with health officials suspecting that doses are going unused and eligible recipients finding little information about how to receive a vaccine.

More than 1.3 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine have been shipped to providers across Texas, but just 475,627 people have been vaccinated with their first dose so far, according to state health data. Health officials attributed much of the discrepancy to reporting delays, but they also raised concerns that vaccines could be languishing on hospital shelves.

Over concern that any vaccines might be going unused, Abbott and Hellerstedt last week urged health care providers to begin vaccinating people 65 and older and those with underlying health conditions, including pregnant women, if the providers have concluded the first phase of vaccinations.

But many providers say supplies are limited and that they still vaccinating the first group of eligible Texans — hospital staffers working directly with coronavirus patients; long-term care residents and staff; emergency workers; and home health care workers — or have not yet received any shipments of the vaccine.

Next tier

The state's plan to include those 65 and over in its second tier group differs from U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, which recommend states next vaccinate those over 74 years old as well as front-line essential workers.

Goodwin and her House colleagues called on Abbott to instead prioritize "those whose occupations require them to interact with people."

The letter also asks health officials to make the vaccine equally available to all Texans "regardless of racial or ethnic background."

An American-Statesman review of the state's online map of COVID-19 vaccine providers found that all but a handful of local providers are west of Interstate 35, which for decades has represented a racial and class divide in Austin.

None of the vaccination sites are in a large portion of Southeast Austin that is home to many of the city's lowest-income and ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Conversely, there are 16 distribution sites in an area bounded by Interstate 35, MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1), Lady Bird Lake and FM 2222.

Hospitalization record

Goodwin's letter also called for a total revision of the state's vaccination plan and frequent updates to the Legislature, which reconvenes Tuesday.

"The slow pace of the vaccination means more people will contract COVID-19, which will continue to overwhelm our hospitals and delay economic recovery," the letter said. "The vaccines cannot be rolled out quickly and effectively unless Texans have confidence in the information they receive from DSHS, the governor and their representatives."

A record number of Texans are hospitalized with the coronavirus across the state, with the state health agency reporting 13,784 hospitalizations Thursday, setting a new record for the fifth day in a row. Just 552 intensive care unit beds are available in Texas, and the number of COVID-19 fatalities continue to climb.

On Thursday, the state health agency also reported 19,598 new COVID-19 cases.

Texas to create community sites for vaccines

January 8, 2021 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Nicole Cobler Austin American-Statesman USA TODAY NETWORK | Section: Test | 798 Words

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Phelan calls for hearing on statewide outages

February 17, 2021 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Aria Jones; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 606 Words

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With millions of Texans huddling in cold homes without power, Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan called Tuesday for a hearing next week to address statewide power outages.

The House State Affairs and Energy Resources committees on Feb. 25 will review the factors that led to the blackouts across the state "for the express purpose of helping Texans understand what went wrong and how we can prevent these conditions from happening again," Phelan, R-Beaumont, said in a news release.

"We must cut through the finger-pointing and hear directly from stakeholders about the factors that contributed to generation staying down at a time when families needed it most, what our state can do to correct these issues, and what steps regulators and grid operators are taking to safeguard our electric grid," Phelan said.

House State Affairs Committee Chairman Chris Paddie, R-Marshall, said in the news release that he looks forward to a "thorough and exhaustive review" of the outages.

"The statewide blackouts raise questions about the reliability of our electric grid and its ability to withstand extreme weather events in the future," he said.

House Energy Resources Committee Chairman Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth, said in the release that he looks forward to working with House members to "get to the bottom of this critical issue."

"More than 2 million Texans have been left without power – some for many hours, some even days – and this is unacceptable," Goldman said. "This joint hearing will provide an opportunity for all Texans to hear from industry officials, regulators and grid operators to get an explanation and understanding of what went wrong and steps they are all taking to make certain this never happens again."

James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said the Legislature must demand answers and ensure that the massive, prolonged outages don't happen again.

"A state that prides itself on energy production left millions of its citizens to freeze in the dark," he said. "It's not just incompetent; it's criminal."

He said he's been without power and heat for 30 hours and had just enough cell signal to send the tweet, and he thanked Phelan for scheduling the hearing.

"This is not a natural disaster – it's years of underinvestment, deregulation, and neglect," Talarico said. "Texas: your government failed you."

Democratic state Rep. Celia Israel of Austin also demanded accountability.

"We need robust hearing to hold everyone involved accountable," she said. "This was Texas getting hit with a cat5 (we knew this storm was coming with several days notice) and letting Texans down."

Other legislators called for resignations or firings from the board of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, the state grid operator.

"After everything that I have heard and read. I think that the CEO & Board (ERCOT) should resign or be fired," said José Menéndez, D-San Antonio.

Terry Canales, D-Edinburg, asked, "Will anyone in Texas government take any responsibility for the children and senior citizens forced to spend 30+ hours without power?"

Ann Johnson, D-Houston, said she and her aides are without power, trying to stay warm like many others.

"We are working hard to get to the bottom of this," she said. "I will do whatever I can for accountability & making sure this doesn't happen again. While we conserve battery power, we will keep sharing updates here."

Others thanked Phelan for requesting the hearings.

"I look forward to getting back to Austin and working with my colleagues on the State Affairs and Energy Resources committees to find out why Texans were left in the cold, dark when they most needed electricity," said Ben Leman, R-Anderson, said. "Let's find the problem and develop a solution that can be quickly implemented to strengthen our power grid."

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Texas' billion-dollar child care opportunity

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Child care is the small, silent engine that drives Texas businesses. It is as simple as this: if our young can't access quality child care, much of the Texas workforce can't return to work. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the essential role child care plays in our economy – it is the overlooked sector that makes all other work possible.

With a billion-dollar infusion by the federal government dedicated to child care, we now have a unique opportunity. First, to ensure that child care locations are open so families can return to work, and second, to enhance the quality of that early learning and care.

Investing these federal dollars to expand access to quality, affordable child care will positively impact our workforce, businesses, and families for years to come.

Practically all industries – especially small businesses – have faced setbacks due to COVID-19 in the form of closures, layoffs, and tremendous economic disruption. No small-business industry has suffered more than licensed child care. Twenty-five percent of all child care centers in Texas closed at least temporarily during the pandemic. And within the first five months of the pandemic, 184 Texas communities became new child care deserts – meaning demand for child care far outweighed supply.

Gov. Greg Abbott and the Texas Workforce Commission are wisely creating a plan for the use of this incoming federal money. The priority is immediate support for struggling providers with a clear eye on increasing quality child care. Funds spent on child care should be spent with accountability and defined outcomes. Because these dollars are a one-shot stimulus, Texas must spend them without creating an ongoing expense to the state after the federal money is gone.

The Legislature is also accountable. If taxpayers are going to pay for quality early learning child care, it should be quality. Three bipartisan bills have been filed this session, which deserve attention and support from legislators, the public and the business community.

Together these three bills will enhance Texas' ability to:

Increase the quality of early education

Ensure accountability for how state dollars are spent on child care

Provide support to enhance the child care workforce

House Bill 1792: Rep. Angie Chen Button (R-Richardson) filed HB 1792 to expand the state's capacity to verify the quality of child care providers and therefore expand families' access to quality child care.

House Bill 2607: Rep. James Talarico (D-Round Rock) filed HB 2607, which ensures subsidized child care programs participate in the Texas Rising Star quality rating system, providing accountability for public funds allocated to the child care sector.

House Bill 619: Child care is all about the people who provide care to kids, and early educators are among the lowest paid people in the Texas workforce. Rep. Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston) filed HB 619 designed to support the child care workforce and raise compensation and education of child care workers.

Texas has a tremendous opportunity we cannot afford to get wrong. Prudent investment of federal dollars along with passage of key legislation will support small businesses, save taxpayer money and improve academic outcomes for more children. All building a strong economic future for our great state.

The bipartisan emergency investment and bipartisan legislation demonstrates a shared understanding that without quality early learning and child care Texans cannot work and the economy cannot recover.

We have a history of bipartisan support for quality early childhood education in Texas. Our public voice must drive decision-making that takes a long-term view and maximizes this opportunity for the benefit of all of our children and families.

Let's use the billion dollars in relief funds and the 87th Legislative session to protect our child care providers, increase access to quality child care for young children in Texas, and put our workforce back to work.

Cullen is a partner with Capstar Partners. Holt is CEO of HOLT CAT and chairman of Spurs Sports & Entertainment.

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Lawmakers should do more to help English language learners

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Two years ago, the Legislature took strong steps to overhaul our school finance system and set the goal of ensuring all Texas kids are strong readers by third grade. While House Bill 3 was a huge achievement — and we especially cheered the funding of full-day pre-k for eligible students — reaching that early literacy goal will require the state to do more.

To reach that third grade reading goal, one key next step is for Texas to better support young English Learners in child care, pre-k and other early grades. English Learners have always been a significant part of the state's public school population. They now account for more than a quarter of Texas students from pre-k through third grade.

Smarter state strategies for English Learners will also help them master both English and their home language, which has well-documented cognitive benefits for children. Our students' potential to become multilingual is also an incredible asset that we should harness to help grow a Texas workforce that competes on the world stage. Of course, the best time to learn both languages is in early childhood, when the rapidly developing brain is like a sponge for language.

To pursue these goals for the state's young English Learners, Texans Care for Children, Philanthropy Advocates, Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and others formed the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative after the passage of HB 3.

The Initiative worked with teachers, researchers, parents, child care providers and other experts across Texas to better understand the challenges and potential solutions.

We learned a lot in our year of research. For example, while Dual Language Immersion is the most effective model of instruction, and the Legislature included a provision in HB 3 to promote it, Texas schools still widely use all kinds of different, less effective approaches to educating young English Learners. Additionally, Texas does not have nearly enough bilingual certified teachers to educate our English Learners. And there's little information on how child care programs educate English Learners, as many programs do not collect data on children's home language, English proficiency, race or ethnicity, and the state does not offer them consistent and comprehensive guidelines for educating English Learners.

When COVID-19 hit, the initiative's work became even more urgent. It turns out that online learning just doesn't work well for pre-k and other early grades. Developing language skills in particular works much better in person compared to Zoom calls and online assignments. Additionally, during the pandemic, students have faced uneven access to learning opportunities, depending on factors like reliable home internet, the availability of a quiet place to study and the time and capacity of busy parents. The result is that during a critical year of early childhood, many young English Learners missed out.

To address these challenges, the Initiative recently published a roadmap of recommendations on the new bilingualex.org website, drawing on the input collected across the state. Legislators have filed bills aimed at implementing several of the recommendations. Sen. Brandon Creighton and Rep. Bobby Guerra filed legislation (SB 1101 and HB 2256) to create a bilingual special education teacher certification focused on English Learners. Sen. Eddie Lucio, Jr. and Guerra introduced bills to create a state strategic plan for supporting young English Learners (SB 560 and HB 2258). Sen. José Menéndez and Rep. James Talarico filed bills to create pre-k class size limits (SB 2081 and HB 41). Beyond these bills, the Legislature can also help English Learners recover from the pandemic through the state budget.

We urge the Legislature to pass these and other initiatives for early childhood English Learners. And we encourage state agencies, school districts and child care providers to take the steps outlined in the roadmap to help more kids and our state reach their full potential.

Feigen is an early childhood policy associate for the nonprofit Texans Care for Children.

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Dozens testify for George Floyd Act - More than 100 sought to speak on police reform bill

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Dozens of people testified in front of a panel of House lawmakers Thursday on the George Floyd Act, a Democratic-led, sweeping police reform measure filed in the wake of nationwide protests that erupted over police brutality last year.

The Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee hearing drew enough attention to open three overflow rooms in the Capitol as more than 100 people were scheduled to testify on the measure, hours after an early morning rally in support of the bill.

State Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, lead author of the bill, said the measure is "not about defunding the police," but rather holding law enforcement officers accountable.

"I don't think they make enough money for what we ask them to do," she added. "This bill is about preserving the sanctity of life. ... It is about transparency and accountability, and it is about preventing others from abusing the power that the state of Texas gives to officers in order to protect our communities across the state. Above all, this bill is about ending systemic racism."

Members of the Texas Legislative Black Caucus unveiled House Bill 88, known as the George Floyd Act, in August ahead of the legislative session. The bill includes a ban on choke holds, requires deadly force to end "the moment the imminent threat" ends, requires a law enforcement officer to intervene if another officer uses excessive force, and limits the use of qualified immunity in police brutality lawsuits. The bill also requires departments to adopt use of force policies that emphasize de-escalation.

The bill was named after George Floyd, an unarmed Black man with Houston roots, who died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck. Derek Chauvin, the officer who pressed his knee to Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes, has been charged with murder and manslaughter.

In protests repeated in other Texas cities, thousands of demonstrators packed Austin streets last spring in response to Floyd's death and to denounce the deaths of Javier Ambler II and Mike Ramos at the hands of police.

Lawmakers heard from family members and close friends of Floyd on Thursday as the Texas measure drew national attention.

Shareeduh Tate, Floyd's cousin, testified remotely in support of the bill.

"I believe the components of House Bill 88 will require your officers to be held accountable, to intervene when there's excessive force being used, to have training in deescalation and racial sensitivity, as well as doing away with the legal protections that are found in qualified immunity," Tate said. "All things that will lead us to having a better situation for people like my cousin who encounter the police."

Travis Cains, who called Floyd his "little brother," urged lawmakers to pass the measure.

"We're asking you and the family's asking you, 'Let's ease up a little bit. Let's put the right people behind the badge,'" he said. "You're not there to kill. You're there to protect and serve."

Police concerns

Despite bipartisan outrage over Floyd's death and a promise from Gov. Greg Abbott to work with lawmakers and Floyd's family, the bill has yet to garner support from Republicans in the Legislature.

Police groups have raised concerns about the bill, especially over the portions of the measure that would limit qualified immunity for officers.

Stan Stanridge, president of the Texas Police Chief's Association and San Marcos police chief, warned that the end of qualified immunity could lead to police officers leaving the force "by the thousands."

He added that he's "not entirely" opposed to the George Floyd Act and agreed with use of force policies and the duty of officers to intervene.

"We cannot judge officers' actions based on 2020 hindsight," Stanridge said. "Officers make split decisions daily."

Charley Wilkinson, executive director of the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas, said the group opposed ending qualified immunity and a part of the measure that would end arrests on fine-only Class C misdemeanors. A spokesman for the Texas Municipal Police Association agreed.

State Rep. Tony Tinderholt, R-Arlington, said he hoped law enforcement groups could work together to find common ground, adding that he believed that parts of the bill were good.

Social justice groups argue that the state should end arrests for Class C misdemeanors because there is a high rate of incarceration for fine-only offenses in Texas. One 2019 study found that about one in six Travis County jail bookings in 2017, were for non-jailable Class C misdemeanors.

West urges compromise

Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, is carrying the George Floyd Act in the Senate and urged lawmakers Thursday to work together to pass the bill. Doing nothing, he added, "would be a slap in the face" to those who have died at the hands of police officers.

"What we look at in terms of the content of the bill obviously should be subject to negotiation," he told lawmakers.

Speaking at a Thursday afternoon news conference as testimony continued inside, West urged police groups and the governor to lay out what reforms they'd like to see in criminal justice reform measures.

As testimony stretched into the late afternoon, the committee also was set to hear a bill filed by Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, in response to the 2019 death of Ambler, who was killed during a traffic stop by Williamson County deputies during taping for "Live PD."

Talarico's House bill 54 would ban police departments from contracting with reality TV shows, which critics say can lead to dangerous acts in pursuit of ratings and fame.

Find more inside

Mother of Michael Ramos backs police reform at rally for George Floyd Act at Texas Capitol. 9A

Mother of Ramos rallies for police reform - Her son was killed by Austin police in April

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Author: Heather Osbourne and Kelsey Bradshaw; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 591 Words

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Shaded by trees outside the Texas Capitol's south entrance Thursday morning, families from across the state recounted how their loved ones were killed by police officers.

The mother of Michael Ramos, who was killed by Austin police in April, said everyone has seen the video of her son being shot by police.

"Some days I feel so broken and alone," Brenda Ramos said. "But, I made a promise to myself and my son. I will do everything to stop my nightmare from happening to another mother."

Ramos was among dozens, including the family of Alexander Gonzales, who rallied at the Capitol to urge state lawmakers to pass police reform bills that were introduced after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police last year, sparking nationwide outrage.

Floyd's death led to a Texas bill, the George Floyd Act, which would ban police chokeholds, require deadly force to end "the moment imminent threat ends," and limit the use of qualified immunity in police brutality lawsuits, among other measures. It was introduced by state Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, and state Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas.

A different bill, filed by state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, seeks to ban state law enforcement agencies from being featured on reality television shows.

Travis Cains, a close friend of Floyd, also spoke at Wednesday's rally.

"I'm here because I am a human being. I am not just an African American. My brother, my friend, wasn't just an African American. He was a human being and what was done was injustice," Cains said. "And from what I see with my own eyes he didn't die there, he was murdered in Minneapolis."

Thursday's rally and the George Floyd Act come after a summer of protests and demonstrations against police brutality after Floyd was killed. Protesters also denounced the death of Breonna Taylor, a woman who was killed by police in Kentucky, and Javier Ambler II in Williamson County.

State Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, D-Austin, filed the Mike Ramos Act on March 11. It would require, among other things, de-escalation training for all police in Texas and the release of police body-worn camera footage after an officer kills someone.

Brenda Ramos said it was crucial for the George Floyd Act and the Mike Ramos Act to be passed to prevent further deaths, adding that too many mothers in Texas were now without their black and brown children as a result of police violence.

"The man who killed my unarmed son a year ago had been indicted for first-degree murder and he's still an Austin police officer," she said. "Enough already. We must have these reforms."

During the rally, the attendees chanted "Fight the power!" Some in the crowd carried signs saying "Black lives matter" and "I can't breathe."

Autumn Simmons, who is from Oregon, said she came to Austin specifically to attend the rally in support of police reform. Simmons said she's been traveling all across the country to support the movement, saying she chose to start traveling to remind people that change needs to continue.

"Whatever free time I have, I'm out here," Simmons said. "We've been treated like animals for so many years. We have rights. Just because the color of our skin is brown doesn't mean that we're negative or hateful."

"We need to unite, come together and stop all of this madness," she continued.

Statesman reporter Hojun Choi contributed to this article.

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Local lawmaker's inclusive House prayer draws fire

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Overlooked by many in Texas House Rule 16 — a "special rule" applicable "in the event of disruptions caused by actual or imminent threat of an emergency, including an epidemic or a pandemic" — is a minor tweak in what's called the "daily order of business."

Pre-pandemic, the rule called for a daily business to begin with the call to order, the registration by members and a "prayer by chaplain." That hasn't changed, except for this nod to the need to restrict access to the House floor: There's still the daily prayer (Lord knows we need all the help we can get during a pandemic), but the "by chaplain" requirement has been deleted.

So instead of hearing from a representative of religion, the House has been hearing prayers from a representative of the people, specifically those in specific districts as Speaker Dade Phelan has called on members to offer the invocation.

Inevitably, this prayerful moment aimed at unity can create controversy because of the heavy skew toward one religion. Eighteen out of 25 prayers offered by members so far this session have mentioned Jesus Christ, either by name or specific reference. That skew is so pronounced, and expected as routine, that efforts to respectfully take the prayer in a more inclusive direction, even with mention of Jesus, can also spark controversy.

The House came upon such an invocation March 24 when Phelan recognized Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, to offer the daily request for help from above (and no, wise guy, we're not talking about lobbyists in the upstairs gallery).

In contrast to the usual religion-specific prayers, Talarico offered what, to my religiously sensitive Jewish ears, sounded like a wonderfully diverse and inviting prayer, including mention of Jesus, that showed how religion can be a unifying experience.

"Holy mystery," Talarico began, "you have so many names. The Torah calls you creator. The Quran calls you peace. The Gita calls you destroyer. And the First Epistle of John calls you perhaps the most beautiful name of all, love. You are the strange love uniting all things — the love that drew elements together after that big bang, the love that drew life itself from those primordial oceans, the love that drew us all to this exact moment, the love we were born of, the love we exist in, and the love we will one day return to.

"In my faith, you expressed yourself through a barefoot rabbi who embodied your perfect love, a crucified carpenter who gave only two commandments, love God and love neighbor, because there is no love of God without love of neighbor. Help us love not just in word but in action. Help us honor not just the name of Jesus but the way of Jesus. Help us free the oppressed, feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, release the prisoner, welcome the stranger, forgive the enemy, and above all, protect your creation."

He continued with an entreaty to "Let us not be hearers of your word but doers of your word in our families, in our communities, and in this chamber — not just with prayers but with policies, not just personal love but political love. Because democracy is not just a constitution; democracy is a covenant."

A little theology. A little civics. And a lot of sense, inclusion and optimism about how religion can be among the paths to something better. To me, as a non-Christian who has long been uncomfortable about the religion-specific nature of most legislative prayers, it was a welcomed effort.

"Holy mystery," Talarico said in wrapping up, "open our minds, open our hearts, open our hands, so that we may build a new world in the shell of the old — a world that is more just, more free, more whole, and more in love with you. In all your many names we pray. Amen."

Save for atheists who raise a defensible point about why there are prayers at governmental functions, hard to find fault with Talarico's prayerful words, right?

Wrong? Nary a discouraging word was heard in the House. But from the past came this, via Twitter and igniting a tweeterly discussion, from ex-Rep. Jonathan Stickland, a Republican from Bedford who was a frequent source of discontent during his four rocky terms in the House before not seeking reelection last year.

Stickland on March 25: "Yesterday in the #txlege 'Republican' leadership allowed a progressive liberal to open the day with this 'prayer.' I am disgusted such blasphemy was spoken in the chamber. Lord forgive us for turning our state over to this trash. Where are the bold followers of Jesus Christ?"

First, let me assure one and all that many "bold followers of Jesus Christ" are in the Legislature, often bold enough to use their brand of religion to make everybody's laws.

Talarico's tweeted response to Stickland: "I'm sorry my prayer offended you, Rep. Stickland. Love feels blasphemous when you've been taught a religion of hate."

Stickland's tweeted response to Talarico: "There is only one who saves, Jesus Christ. To say otherwise is wrong. I'll pray that you see that soon."

Others joined the Twitter conversation with various points of view. I liked this one from actress Betty Buckley:

"Stickland, you are the blasphemy & you are an embarrassment to Texas!! Bless your teeny little heart. Love is so much bigger, so much greater than your hateful notions."

Amen. Here's wishing a meaningful Easter for the so many for whom the day is so important. And for my Jewish friends, as Passover's end approaches, enjoy the return to the miracle of leavened bread.

As I See It

Ken Herman

Austin American-Statesman

USA TODAY NETWORK

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Hearing split on trans sports bill - Opponents: Vulnerable children targeted to solve nonissue

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Legislation that would ban transgender girls from competing in sports within their gender identity in Texas public schools drew sharp opposition from parents, clergy, transgender Texans and their advocates during a lengthy House committee hearing that lasted into Tuesday night at the Capitol.

Opponents said House Bill 4042 would target vulnerable schoolchildren to solve a nonexistent problem, codify cruelty into law, deprive transgender children of the benefits of athletics and further stigmatize students who already struggle with bullying and exclusion.

"This bill invites further discrimination. It does nothing to raise fairness and safety for young women and girls in sports," said Bishop Suffragan Kathryn Ryan of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas.

"All we are asking is that you continue to allow transgender youth to have the same opportunities provided to women," Ryan told the Public Education Committee.

But supporters said the bill is necessary to protect competition and level the playing field for girls who should not have to compete against athletes who were born male.

Rep. Cole Hefner, R-Mount Pleasant, told the committee that his bill also is a safety measure, designed to protect girls from "biological males" who can have larger bodies, denser bones and stronger muscles, particularly in contact sports.

"The safety aspect is common sense," Hefner said. "I mean, we can look around the room and that's common sense. And it's science, and there are experts here that can speak to that. But how many girls, biological girls, that have worked their whole life to get that scholarship?"

He said the bill would codify school athletics rules by basing gender determination by each student's original birth certificate — though girls would continue to be allowed to compete in boys sports if a comparable girls team is not available.

Jennifer Evans with Save Women's Sports, a national organization pushing for laws similar to HB 4042, said allowing transgender girls to compete in girls sports erases the progress made with Title IX.

"Do transgender athletes have a right to compete in the world of athletics?" Evans testified. "Absolutely, but not at the cost of destroying Title IX by deciding which sex they get to compete as. If we allow this to continue, it would be the end of women's sports as we know it."

A nearly identical bill passed the Senate last week on a party-line vote.

No examples of problems in Texas

Opponents of the bill, saying there have been no instances of problems caused by transgender athletes in Texas schools, repeatedly pressed supporters to justify its passage.

Hefner said he had no examples of problems in Texas, noting that such information is not available. "I don't know how we would know the answer to that," he said.

Don Garner, executive director of the Texas Faith and Freedom Coalition, said HB 4042 was needed to protect the safety of girls and the integrity of their sports, championships and competitive records.

"Those we represent are alarmed by the unfairness of biological males competing with females," Garner said.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock and a committee member, interjected, asking: "What part of your faith moves you to hurt the least of these?"

"I would disagree with the characterization," Garner said.

But Talarico continued, "What part of your love of freedom moves you to ask the government to police people's private parts?"

Talarico then summarized the main arguments he heard in favor of the bill — that transgender athletes have a genetic advantage, their inclusion is disruptive to team cohesion and their exclusion would promote safety — and said the same arguments were made to keep Black athletes out of pro sports.

"Some things are more important than perfectly fair competition in sports," Talarico said.

Corporate, NCAA opposition

About 30 other states also are contemplating limits on transgender student-athletes.

More than 40 corporations based or doing business in Texas issued a statement opposing the athletics bills, saying it would make it harder to attract and keep employees.

"The fullness of our team members' lives, and the lives of their families, stretch well beyond the workplace. They deserve to feel safe, welcome, and treated with dignity in those settings, too," said the statement, signed by Amazon, American Airlines, Apple, Dell Technologies, Facebook, IBM, Microsoft and Silicon Labs, among others.

The NCAA has warned states contemplating limits on transgender athletes that they risk losing championship events, which can pump millions of dollars into local economies.

Steiner, Stevens vie for Round Rock's Place 5 seat

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Two candidates are running for the Place 5 seat on the Round Rock City Council.

Tina Steiner, a longtime educator in the Round Rock school district, is running against Kristin Stevens, a pediatric speech-language pathologist. They are running to replace Writ Baese, who announced in January that he would not seek reelection.

In the other City Council race, incumbent Matthew Baker is being challenged by Janneke Parrish for the Place 3 seat.

The winners of Saturday's election will serve a three-year term. Early voting will run through Tuesday.

In the Place 5 race, Steiner, 58, who has worked in Round Rock schools for more than 20 years, said that if she is elected she will ensure that the council remains transparent, fair and inclusive.

"We must listen more to our constituents and the opinions of industry professionals so that we as a city can be equipped to face important challenges together," Steiner said.

Steiner said the challenges facing Round Rock include increased property taxes, rapid growth, and an intense focus on big business and very little on the community, specifically residents in older neighborhoods.

"As a lifelong resident, I have witnessed Round Rock grow from a sleepy little town of 1,900 to over 140,000 residents today," Steiner said. "Growth is inevitable, but Round Rock should manage its growth through a commitment to planning for better infrastructure for our roads and buildings, and find solutions for our worsening traffic if we are to continue growing."

Steiner also said she wants to make certain Round Rock has adequate public transportation and equitable zoning.

"We have to take care of our public servants, veterans and students attending our city's institutes of higher learning," Steiner said. "The only way to care for our community is to ensure we do not create any economic burdens or displace families and disrupt their way of living."

Stevens said Round Rock residents are concerned about transportation, taxes and managing the city's growth.

"My team and I have knocked on over 2,000 doors and talked to hundreds of residents since the ice and snow melted in February," Stevens said. "Residents want the council to continue to develop policies that positively and directly impact Round Rock, without being influenced by Austin."

Stevens said she wants to get the economy back on track by safely reopening businesses and developing a transportation plan that works for residents.

"My campaign is focused on these priorities for Round Rock, as well focusing on policies such as low property tax rates that positively and directly impact Round Rock families and business," Stevens said.

"I also want to make sure the city is maintaining the critical infrastructure we depend on for clean water, power and other essential services as the city continues to grow."

About the candidates

Tina Steiner

Education: Associate degree from Austin Community College; Bachelor of Science in interdisciplinary studies from Texas State University; master's in education with emphasis on secondary education from Grand Canyon University; master's in education curriculum and instruction from Grand Canyon University.

Community involvement: Vice chair of state Rep. James Talarico's Community Advisory Board, member of Round Rock Independent School District Advisory Council, member of RRISD District Level Committee, member of city of Round Rock Historic Preservation Commission, Travis County volunteer deputy voter registrar, member of RRISD Strategic Planning Committee, appointed to Round Rock Housing Authority, graduate of Leadership Round Rock, graduate of Ascend Emerging Leaders.

Kristin Stevens

Education: Bachelor of Science in communication sciences from University of Texas; Master of Science in communication sciences and disorders from UT-Dallas.

Community involvement: Board chairman for Chasco Family YMCA, vice president and incoming president of Young Men's Service League in Round Rock, secretary and former soup and bread chair for Round Rock Woman's Club, president of Round Rock High School cross-country booster club, treasurer adviser for Round Rock Sweethearts, member of Round Rock Chamber of Commerce, member of Professional Women of Williamson County, founding member of Ascension Seton Williamson Women's Development Board, member of RRISD Safety and Security Task Force.

TEXAS LEGISLATURE - Bid to ban trans athletes hits snag - Committee votes not to move bill to full House

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[OpenURL Link](#)

An effort to ban transgender student athletes from competing in sports within their gender identity was dealt a significant setback Tuesday after a Texas House committee voted not to advance a Senate-approved bill to the full House.

With a 6-5 vote in favor of the legislation, Senate Bill 29 was one vote short of the seven needed for a majority of the 13-member Public Education Committee — the minimum number of votes required to move the bill forward. Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, didn't vote. Rep. Dan Huberty, R-Houston, wasn't at the dais. He was presenting a bill before a different House committee when the vote was taken on Senate Bill 29, an aide said.

The bill and others like it have faced opposition from parents, activists and transgender Texans who say it is cruel, targets vulnerable children and would deprive them of the benefits that come with sports. The bill's supporters have said it is necessary to level the playing field for girls who shouldn't have to compete against athletes who were born male and that it is an issue of safety.

Rep. Mary González, D-Clint, who is on the committee, said legislators need to work together to ensure the bill doesn't move forward.

"We don't need this piece of legislation," González said. "The consequences of the legislation could go literally off the rails, and that's not going to be helpful to the House, to the future and most importantly to kids."

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said at the hearing that voting the bill out of committee would result in a contentious day on the House floor and waste precious legislative time.

"If we vote for this bill, I fear it'll be a stain that we can't remove," Talarico said ahead of the committee vote. "It will be enough to tarnish the good name of this committee. It'll be enough to overshadow the good work we did last session. I know we all have to vote on our conscience, and I pray for forgiveness for this committee and for the members on this committee that I love very much."

Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian, had introduced a committee substitute to the bill that Dutton said would remove the phrase "biological sex" to align with state birth certificate standards. It also removed a section of the bill relating to official birth certificates.

"As my mother would say, it's putting lipstick on a pig," Talarico said. "It's still a pig, though. It's still codifying the noninclusive UIL policy that we currently have."

The bill could be revived, however, for committee members to reconsider their votes.

House Bill 4042, a companion bill sponsored by Rep. Cole Hefner, R-Mount Pleasant, was the subject of a lengthy committee hearing last month but hasn't received a vote.

A person working in Hefner's office Tuesday told the American-Statesman that Hefner wasn't expecting it to receive a vote after SB 29 did not advance.

SB 29, approved a party-line vote in mid-April, would require athletes in Texas public high schools and grade

schools to compete in sports based on the "biological sex" listed on their original birth certificate. Under that definition, biological boys would be banned from competing in girls sports, although girls could compete in boys sports if a comparable female sport was not available.

Amended birth certificates, which can be issued to reflect gender changes for transgender people, would no longer be accepted by the University Interscholastic League, which oversees extracurricular athletic events.

More than 40 corporations based or doing business in Texas issued a statement opposing the athletics bills and the NCAA has warned states contemplating limits on transgender athletes that they risk losing championship events, which can pump millions of dollars into local economies.

Inside on 1B

Sid Miller urges judge to void Senate's COVID-19 rules

Herman: Legislative deadlines and best mustache in the Texas House

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Texas Legislature - House approves voting bill - Debate over elections measure ran to 3 a.m.

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[OpenURL Link](#)

After a bitter partisan fight, rapid late-night changes and a 3 a.m. vote, the Texas House approved a sweeping Republican election bill Friday that would increase regulations on voting by mail, add several election-related crimes and boost protections for partisan poll watchers.

Many of the changes to Senate Bill 7, negotiated in the early morning hours among members of both parties and added by amendment with little or no explanation, were designed to reduce criminal penalties for election law violations and limit criminal liability for mistakes made by voters and those who help them cast a ballot.

The 18 agreed-upon amendments, including 13 by Democrats, made for a rancor-free ending to the debate that began Thursday evening, but they weren't enough to win support by Democrats.

"These took this bill from very ugly to just ugly," said Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio.

After giving initial approval to SB 7 shortly after 3 a.m., final House approval came Friday afternoon with a 78-64 vote almost entirely along party lines that returns the bill to the Senate.

The bill, however, looks nothing like the legislation that left the Senate on April 1, all but guaranteeing that a conference committee of senators and representatives will hash out the final version — making the fight over changes to Texas election laws far from over and leaving the ultimate version of the legislation far from certain.

Spoiling for a fight

Democrats came to the House chamber Thursday evening spoiling for a fight, drawing up more than 100 amendments to attack SB 7 provisions they believed would make it more difficult to vote, particularly for nonwhite Texans and those with disabilities who require help to cast a ballot.

"We're prepared to fight this all night," Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said in a Twitter post that included a photo of himself wearing a face mask reading "Good trouble," quoting the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis, a longtime Democratic warrior for voting rights.

Rep. Briscoe Cain, R-Deer Park, said SB 7 was designed to boost flagging confidence in the integrity of elections, ensure that every vote cast was legal and thwart vote harvesters and others who coerce or cajole voters to cast ballots a certain way.

"I don't believe this bill suppresses any votes. It's to help all voters," he said, adding that several changes were adopted based on input from disability rights and civil rights advocates.

Democrats argued that SB 7 was built on the foundation of the "big lie" that widespread voter fraud cost Donald Trump the 2020 election.

Rep. Rafael Anchía, D-Dallas, said House members were more likely to be struck by lightning than to find voter fraud in Texas.

"You know what undermines confidence in our elections? It's the lies that are told in the face of all contrary evidence by politicians for their own and their party's political gain," he said.

Other Democrats said SB 7 would unfairly target urban centers and discourage voting by those who typically support Democrats, particularly Latino, Black and Asian Americans and Texans with a disability.

"Make no mistake, the backers of these election bills believe it will help Republicans and hurt Democrats. We all know that," said Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie. "It's a straight-up assault on voting rights."

'Purity of the ballot box'

When debate began Thursday, Anchia took exception to SB 7's statement of purpose that said the bill was designed to "preserve the purity of the ballot box" — a phrase used historically to deny the right to vote to Black Texans and create all-white primaries, he said.

"Are you aware of the history of that?" Anchia asked.

No, Cain replied, adding, "I'm sorry to hear that." The phrase was taken directly from the Texas Constitution, he said, noting later that he'd entertain an amendment to change "purity" to "integrity or something."

SB 7 protections for poll watchers, volunteers who typically represent candidates or political parties, drew sharp criticism from several Democrats, particularly a provision that would block election officials from removing poll watchers unless they break the law.

That provision opens polling places to all sorts of mischief from poll watchers, who in the past have been used to intimidate and harass Black and Latino voters, said Rep. Jessica González, D-Dallas.

"It's old Jim Crow dressed up in what our colleagues are calling election integrity," González said. "We should be encouraging more Texans to vote, not try to turn someone who makes a simple mistake into a felon."

González proposed the night's first amendment, which would have gutted the bill by removing its enacting clause. By the time it was defeated by Republicans, almost 2 1/2 hours had passed, and both sides were settling in for a long fight.

Then Democrats raised a point of order arguing that SB 7 could not be considered because its bill analysis was flawed, and the pace slowed even further. All work stopped on the House floor for two hours and 10 minutes while parliamentarians and House members in both parties hashed over the point of order.

At 10:30 p.m., Cain announced that action on SB 7 would be postponed for at least an hour while negotiations continued on amendments. More than three hours later, House members returned to SB 7, tacked on the 18 agreed-upon amendments and adjourned for the night — less than seven hours before the House was due back in session.

The first added amendment struck the phrase "and preserve the purity of the ballot box" from the bill.

Other changes made by members of both parties clarified that poll watchers can be removed for committing a "breach of the peace" or a crime in polling places; required poll watchers to be warned before removal; and stated that poll watchers cannot photograph private information, ballots or "the marking of a ballot."

Another change added protections from prosecution for attendants and caregivers who help a person with a disability vote.

The result left some hard-core Texas conservatives lamenting the missed opportunity for more substantive changes and preparing to press the Senate to go further on state election procedures.

Democrats, meantime, were looking in another direction.

"You have your majority, but guess what? I look forward to seeing you in federal court," Martinez Fischer told Republicans on Friday. "You may have the vote today, but we are all equal in federal court."

Find more inside

GOP senators won't recognize the House-passed version of their voting bill. 5A

House Democrats torpedo bill allowing Lost Creek to leave Austin. 1B

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Limits on classroom topics get approval - Bill's authors say it aims to curb political agendas

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[OpenURL Link](#)

A bill targeting school discussions of racism and social issues gained initial approval from the Texas House after several amendments and a debate that extended into early Tuesday morning.

The Republican authors of the broad legislation, which already passed the Senate, say it aims to prevent political agendas in schools, but education advocates have expressed concerns that it will hinder student civic engagement and class discussions of history and racism.

Ahead of the vote, dozens of organizations — including business groups and school district leaders in Austin and the Dallas area — joined opposition to the legislation.

"The bill has gotten a great deal of attention for its focus on race and gender, but it is far more broad than that, and would limit discussion in classrooms potentially of almost any current issue," Austin school board Trustee Lynn Boswell said.

It follows similar legislation passed in other states against the teaching of critical race theory, an academic framework of thought challenging white supremacy and systemic racism. In Texas, the bill, which passed 81-52 in a preliminary vote, still requires another vote in the House and Senate approval of the amendments before it can potentially reach Gov. Greg Abbott's desk.

Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, who authored the bill, insisted it did not ban discussions of topics such as racism or current events, but he tweaked the bill to say teachers may not be compelled to discuss "a particular current event or widely debated and currently controversial issue."

He also added an amendment specifically against requiring "an understanding of The 1619 Project," an initiative from The New York Times examining the role of slavery in the founding of the United States that sparked criticism from conservatives. The amendment also takes a stance against teachings that "slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to, the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality."

Democrats accused Toth of "white-washing history" and called the amendment hypocritical in light of another section of the bill that called for teaching "the founding documents of the United States" and specific texts.

Democrats tacked on several amendments expanding that section to include the history of women's suffrage and various civil rights movements.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, also added amendments to acknowledge "the history of white supremacy ... and the ways in which it was morally wrong" and to ensure public schools cannot punish students for discussing the topics opposed in the bill.

But despite repeated efforts, Democrats failed to strike language from the legislation that bans schools from granting students credit for work with organizations involved in political advocacy and from accepting private funds for the development of curriculum that the bill opposes.

Critics, including Austin district leaders, say these provisions will severely limit students' and schools' work with organizations, including those such as Rotary or Boys and Girls clubs.

"It would limit the ability for districts to partner with industry and nonprofit providers for career and technical education partners like Dell, who works with Austin ISD students for innovative courses like computer science," Boswell said at a Monday news conference on the district's legislative priorities.

State authority

Austin district leaders also spoke against bills that would clear the way for the state to take control of school boards with schools repeatedly rated poorly by the state based on standardized testing results.

The legislation, filed by Houston lawmakers, seeks to address a pending legal battle over the state's ability to take over the Houston school district, but has it encountered opposition from many Democrats. Austin district officials noted it could affect other districts with struggling schools.

"If passed into law, it would have wide ranging-effects on all school districts in Texas," school board Trustee Yasmin Wagner said.

She said the legislation, which has cleared the Senate but has yet to reach the full House, troubles district leaders because of provisions that would expand the state education commissioner's power to investigate districts, including with confidential witnesses, and make his decisions on affected districts "final and unappealable."

It would leave school districts without the ability to question or challenge state takeovers of boards, Wagner said, and would shift local control toward "a state governed system of schools."

Virtual learning

But Austin board members expressed support for legislation that would allow public schools to offer and count students in virtual learning programs as part of their enrollment, which is used to determine public school funding.

Trustee Arati Singh lauded the legislation, which must still go through the Senate, for increasing local control instead of limiting students to the state-run Texas Virtual School Network.

"We support this as a temporary solution to give flexibility to districts and families as we come out of the pandemic," she said.

Javier Ambler Law passes the Senate - Texas bill would ban reality TV in policing

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[OpenURL Link](#)

A proposed law named for a 40-year-old Black man whose deadly encounter with Williamson County sheriff's deputies sparked questions about reality TV in American policing won overwhelming support Thursday in the Texas Senate and now heads to the governor's desk.

The Javier Ambler Law bans law enforcement agencies from contracting with shows, such as the now-canceled but long-running series "COPS" and the defunct show "Live PD," which was filming with Williamson County deputies the night Javier Ambler II died.

The measure, which passed the Senate in a 27-3 vote with no discussion, had already passed the Texas House and received resounding bipartisan support.

"Javier Ambler was a beloved father and son," the Ambler family said in a statement Thursday. "While the Legislation was too late to save his life, it will undoubtedly prevent similar tragedies in the future. Law enforcement should never be the product of reality television."

The law follows months of investigative reporting by the American-Statesman and KVUE-TV, which first published details of Ambler's death in June. The incident previously received no public attention, and Ambler's family only knew that he died in law enforcement custody.

Former Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody and his administration refused for months to release information about the March 2019 fatal arrest. But records received through the Texas Public Information Act showed Deputies J.J. Johnson and Zach Camden chased Ambler into Austin in a pursuit that began over his failure to dim his headlights.

Ambler crashed his SUV several times before it became disabled, according to records that were ordered released by the Texas attorney general's office. Body camera video from an Austin police officer who arrived at the scene showed deputies using their Tasers on Ambler four times as he gasped that he had congestive heart failure and could not breathe.

"Live PD," a highly rated show on A&E, had production crews with Johnson and Camden that night, and Ambler's family and others have questioned whether the presence of TV cameras caused deputies to perform for the cameras.

"Live PD" later said it had destroyed the video in Ambler's death.

Chody and Jason Nassour, who was the county's general counsel at the time, were indicted in September on evidence tampering charges in Williamson County for what prosecutors said was their role in the video's destruction. In March of this year, a grand jury in Travis County also indicted them on evidence tampering charges for what investigators said were steps they took in Austin the night of Ambler's death.

Prosecutors have not described their alleged actions, and attorneys for Chody, who was defeated in the November general election, and Nassour have said they broke no laws.

Also in March, a grand jury in Travis County indicted Johnson and Camden on manslaughter charges after prosecutors said they showed a reckless disregard for Ambler's safety. They no longer are on the force, and their

attorneys have said they plan to aggressively defend their actions at trial.

Recent Statesman investigations also revealed other instances in which the department relied upon dramatic police tactics in front of TV cameras that experts say were unnecessary and dangerous to both deputies and residents and could have been more easily and peacefully resolved.

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said he filed the bill, which was supported in the Senate by Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, to prevent future incidents like Ambler's death. The measure stipulated that another popular show, "Lone Star Law," may continue to showcase Texas game wardens for the Animal Planet network.

"Not only has the Javier Ambler Law been endorsed by civil right groups, law enforcement officials across the state recognize that by banning these reality TV shows we can help re-instill faith in our law enforcement officials and help to rebuilt trust between communities and police departments," Talarico said.

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House says home-school kids can do activities

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"They're not exempt from paying taxes because they keep their kids home to be home-schooled. They have a right to participate."

Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville

Perennially and biennially, this one's been on the list of perennial biennial issues at Your State Capitol: Should a kid be allowed to play football for a high school he doesn't attend? Or kids in other sports and band and debate and all other extracurricular activities under the University Interscholastic League umbrella?

In short, to qualify for a school's extracurricular activities should a kid have to participate in the school's curricular activities? Yes, the UIL long has said.

Nope, the House said Thursday.

Eight years after he began this battle, Rep. James Frank — to whom the issue is both policy and personal — at long last won House approval for his bill allowing home-schooled kids to participate in UIL activities. Approval came despite opposition from educators, coaches and some home-school parents who fear an entry point for further state interference.

"We made it," Frank, R-Wichita Falls, said Wednesday as House Bill 547, this year's incarnation of his effort, hit the House floor on the penultimate day it could have come up for a preliminary vote this year.

A 78-65 vote on Wednesday advanced it to Thursday's 80-64 final vote that sent HB 547 to the Senate, which had approved the concept back in 2013 but might or might not have enough time to vote on it this year prior to the May 31 end of the legislative session.

In the 2019 and 2017 sessions, Frank's effort died in committee. The effort met the same fate in 2015 when sponsored by Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston.

House approval came after the chamber dealt with some of the tricky questions on the topic.

Would home-school students only be able to participate in UIL activities at the public school they're eligible to attend? Yes.

Would they be subject to the same immunization requirements? Yes.

Free from the no-pass, no-play requirement that governs public school students' UIL participation, would home-schoolers have to pass tests to show academic progress? Yes.

Would public schools have to accept home-school students into UIL activities? No. It would be local option.

The personal side of the issue had Frank choked up a bit as he shared it with the House. He and wife Alisha have six sons, including two brothers adopted five years ago who had been in the Child Protective Services system.

He told of Eli, a son who had a rough time in public school before the Franks went the home-school route with him,

as they periodically had with their other kids.

Eli is doing great now, in part, Frank said, because he's been able to play on a non-UIL soccer team while home-schooling in Austin.

"The boy who had never put on a sports uniform at the age of 11 is competing at a reasonably high level in soccer when he is in Austin," Frank said Wednesday. "But when he is in Wichita Falls, there is no option."

(Another family note: During Wednesday's debate, Frank got word of the birth of his first grandchild, a girl, the father of six sons delightedly announced.)

The debate offered a glimpse into how some folks' attitude about home schooling has evolved.

"Something about this last year has taught me to feel a little differently about home school than I did maybe before last March," said Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville. "My daughter went back to school recently and then came home after two weeks and said that 'I don't think I'm ready to do school in person yet' for a variety of reasons.

"Before last March," Lucio said, "I never would have thought of home school as an option. But this last year has taught us a lot. And it has taught us how to teach our children from home. And for some families that's what makes sense."

Estimates have shown there are 350,000 Texas kids schooled at home. Getting them into group activities is vital, Lucio said in backing Frank's bill.

"They're not exempt from paying taxes because they keep their kids home to be home-schooled," Lucio said of parents who make that choice. "They have a right to participate."

But during Wednesday's debate, Andrea Chevalier, an Association of Texas Professional Educators lobbyist — noting the state treats home schools as private schools — tweeted: "Having school districts pay for the participation of these students in UIL is using public dollars for private school students."

Though there were prolonged floor discussions on amendments, no House members spoke out against the overall concept. The vote, however, was relatively tight.

Thirty-five states allow home-schoolers to participate in public school extracurricular activities. Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow was a star quarterback at a Florida high school he didn't attend. Nice that he had that opportunity, but I always wonder about the kid at that school who lost the starting QB role to a kid who didn't attend that school.

Frank's bill squeezed out of House committee via a 7-6 vote, including support from Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, who told Frank at the committee hearing: "This is a tough issue for a lot of us. And I've gotten pushback from some of our public school advocates and understand the pushback. But as I've told you, I just fall back on the belief that we can't punish kids for the choices that their parents make."

Joe Martin, Texas High School Coaches Association executive director, testified against the bill, telling lawmakers that public school students face requirements that "cannot be replicated in the home-school setting in an equitable manner."

Paula Broadway, a home-school parent/teacher, also testified against it, expressing fear it could lead to increased state interference in home schools.

Kevin McCasland, Olton school district superintendent and representing the Texas Association of Community Schools, also opposed it, concerned that home-schoolers wouldn't have to meet the same standards, including no-pass, no-play, that public school students must meet to participate in extracurriculars.

But Jeremy Newman, policy director for the Texas Home School Coalition, said the concept has worked well in the many states in which it exists.

The Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops expressed support for the bill.

In addition to the high school coaches association, opponents include Coalition for Education Funding, Texas Association of School Boards, Texas Association of School Administrators, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association, Texas PTA and Texas School Alliance.

In 2015, when Dutton sponsored similar legislation, I asked him about the high school kid who might lose his starting quarterback job to a kid who doesn't attend that school.

"He needs to go out and practice harder," Dutton told me back then.

As I See It

Ken Herman

Austin American-Statesman

USA TODAY NETWORK

"They're not exempt from paying taxes because they keep their kids home to be home-schooled. They have a right to participate."

Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville

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Bill would cap insulin prices

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The average list price of insulin nearly tripled between 2002 and 2013, according to a 2018 study by the American Diabetes Association. An analysis of the bill by state Sen. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, said the rising costs led to people rationing their insulin, which jeopardizes their health and safety. In the analysis, Kolkhorst also said the rate of adults in Texas diagnosed with diabetes is above the national average. Nearly 2.7 million adult Texans were estimated to have a diabetes diagnosis in 2018, according to survey data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A bipartisan bill aimed at limiting the skyrocketing cost of insulin — medication diabetics need to survive — is nearing the legislative finish line with little more than a week before Texas lawmakers head home.

Even for insured Texans, one month's supply of the drug can cost more than \$1,000. At least 15 states have passed similar legislation with insulin co-pay caps ranging from \$25 to \$100, said Veronica De La Garza, state government affairs director for the American Diabetes Association.

Senate Bill 827 would cap the co-pay on insulin at \$25 for a 30-day supply for those with health benefits. This is regardless of the amount or type of insulin prescribed.

The Senate passed the bill and the House could take it up on Sunday. Wednesday is the deadline for the House to pass Senate-approved bills.

"It would mean that we would be able to manage paying for a medication that we need to live ... which then reduces suppressing us in this economic state, which would allow us to be more productive and essentially thrive, not just survive," said Reva Verma, a Texan who volunteers with the American Diabetes Association.

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People with Type 1 diabetes have to take insulin every day, and the disease is thought to be caused by an autoimmune reaction that stops the body from producing insulin. There is no known way to prevent Type 1 diabetes, according to the CDC.

A large majority of those with diabetes have Type 2, which means the body doesn't use insulin well and can't keep blood sugar at normal levels. This type can be prevented with healthy lifestyle changes, the CDC says.

Talarico saw cost firsthand

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said he discovered he had Type 1 diabetes while first running for the Texas House in 2018. At a news conference promoting insulin price cap legislation, he recalled a 25-mile walk through his district, stopping along the way to hold town halls.

But about halfway through, he said he started to feel fatigued and nauseous.

"I want to spend the next 15 minutes listening to you, but I am going to sit down because I am a little tired," he told a crowd of Hutto voters.

Talarico said he went home and slept 36 hours before his parents rushed him to the emergency room. He said he spent five days there and paid \$684 for his first month supply of insulin.

"Now that I'm a legislator I have excellent state health insurance, so I can now afford my insulin," Talarico said at the conference. "Every Texan should be entitled to the same."

Talarico authored House Bill 82, a companion to the SB 827, with Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville. Over 90 representatives signed on as co-authors.

Another bill, HB 18, would ensure Texans without prescription health coverage don't go without such needed drugs as insulin and would create a program to lower costs. The bill passed the House and has until midnight Wednesday to pass the Senate.

Drug pricing complexity

The American Diabetes Association assembled a group of experts in 2017 to better understand insulin affordability, De La Garza said. In a 2018 report, the group found the insulin supply chain lacks transparency.

"The reasons for this increase are not entirely clear but are due in part to the complexity of drug pricing in general and of insulin pricing in particular," according to the report.

The retail price for insulin results from prices, rebates and fees negotiated among insurance companies, pharmacies, pharmacy benefits managers, drug companies and drug wholesalers.

The report said prices set by manufacturers — Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk and Sanofi — "have risen precipitously."

The report found a widening gap between the price manufacturers set and the price manufacturers receive, which "appears to be the result of increasing rebates and discounts negotiated between stakeholders."

The report found manufacturer rebates often are not passed on to people with diabetes.

Negotiations often result in changing health coverage rules that differ from plan to plan, year to year, and even within the same year. When coverage of insulin changes within the same year, "it places a burden on people with diabetes and providers and may have a negative health impact," according to the report.

A Sanofi spokesperson said the amount Sanofi receives for insulin has been falling for six consecutive years.

"Sanofi supports state efforts to cap monthly co-pays for covered insulin," spokesperson Sally Bain said. "We also support legislation that would require rebates to be shared at the pharmacy counter, require plans to cover insulin without applying a deductible, and prohibit plans from imposing a higher co-pay than its net cost after manufacturer rebates."

An Eli Lilly spokesperson provided a statement from the company that said, "Lilly agrees insulin should be affordable to anyone who needs it." The statement said Lilly has created a program that makes anyone using its insulin eligible to purchase a monthly prescription for \$35. It said people with lower incomes or in desperate need can get Lilly insulin at no charge.

Novo Nordisk and Sanofi also have programs that offer insulin at low or no cost to those who qualify.

But the Texas Association of Health Plans said in a news release that "copay cap mandates will not stop these unjustified price hikes or lower the cost of insulin" and would allow "Big Pharma" to continue raising insulin prices without transparency or accountability.

The association said that "some states have turned to the mandates as a quick political win," and it instead supports legislation such as HB 18, which "targets the real problem — high out-of-pocket costs for the uninsured" and lowers the price of insulin without shifting additional costs to employers.

Texas Employers for Insurance Reform, which advocates driving down the costs of health insurance, also opposes SB 827. The organization said in a news release that the bill "places another expensive unfunded mandate on health insurance that will increase premiums and cause more Texas to go without health insurance."

The organization said the bill would take a critical choice away from employers and Texans in choosing the type of insurance they will need.

"The real solution is to attack the high cost of insulin and not place caps on out-of-pocket expenses," the release said. "By lowering the cost of insulin, which continues to go up even though it has been around for decades without generic competition, consumers are helped with more affordable alternatives."

Verma, the American Diabetes Association volunteer who is a small-business owner from Houston, said it's important to remember that diabetes is a chronic condition that requires several other expenses, including blood sugar testing supplies, medical visits and mental health services. She said her continuous glucose monitor alone costs her an extra \$3,000 a year.

"It goes all the way down to the types of shoes you wear, because we have circulation problems in our feet over time," Verma said. "If you add that to the rising cost of insulin, there's no way we can afford all of that and live that healthy lifestyle."

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The Senate passed the bill and the House could take it up on Sunday. Wednesday is the deadline for the House to pass Senate-approved bills.

"It would mean that we would be able to manage paying for a medication that we need to live ... which then reduces suppressing us in this economic state, which would allow us to be more productive and essentially thrive, not just survive," said Reva Verma, a Texan who volunteers with the American Diabetes Association.

The average list price of insulin nearly tripled between 2002 and 2013, according to a 2018 study by the American Diabetes Association. An analysis of the bill by state Sen. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, said the rising costs led to people rationing their insulin, which jeopardizes their health and safety.

In the analysis, Kolkhorst also said the rate of adults in Texas diagnosed with diabetes is above the national average. Nearly 2.7 million adult Texans were estimated to have a diabetes diagnosis in 2018, according to survey data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

People with Type 1 diabetes have to take insulin every day, and the disease is thought to be caused by an autoimmune reaction that stops the body from producing insulin. There is no known way to prevent Type 1 diabetes, according to the CDC.

A large majority of those with diabetes have Type 2, which means the body doesn't use insulin well and can't keep blood sugar at normal levels. This type can be prevented with healthy lifestyle changes, the CDC says.

Talarico saw cost firsthand

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said he discovered he had Type 1 diabetes while first running for the Texas House in 2018. At a news conference promoting insulin price cap legislation, he recalled a 25-mile walk through his district, stopping along the way to hold town halls.

But about halfway through, he said he started to feel fatigued and nauseous.

"I want to spend the next 15 minutes listening to you, but I am going to sit down because I am a little tired," he told a crowd of Hutto voters.

Talarico said he went home and slept 36 hours before his parents rushed him to the emergency room. He said he spent five days there and paid \$684 for his first month supply of insulin.

"Now that I'm a legislator I have excellent state health insurance, so I can now afford my insulin," Talarico said at the conference. "Every Texan should be entitled to the same."

Talarico authored House Bill 82, a companion to the SB 827, with Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville. Over 90 representatives signed on as co-authors.

Another bill, HB 18, would ensure Texans without prescription health coverage don't go without such needed drugs as insulin and would create a program to lower costs. The bill passed the House and has until midnight Wednesday to pass the Senate.

Drug pricing complexity

The American Diabetes Association assembled a group of experts in 2017 to better understand insulin affordability, De La Garza said. In a 2018 report, the group found the insulin supply chain lacks transparency.

"The reasons for this increase are not entirely clear but are due in part to the complexity of drug pricing in general and of insulin pricing in particular," according to the report.

The retail price for insulin results from prices, rebates and fees negotiated among insurance companies, pharmacies, pharmacy benefits managers, drug companies and drug wholesalers.

The report said prices set by manufacturers — Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk and Sanofi — "have risen precipitously."

The report found a widening gap between the price manufacturers set and the price manufacturers receive, which "appears to be the result of increasing rebates and discounts negotiated between stakeholders."

The report found manufacturer rebates often are not passed on to people with diabetes.

Negotiations often result in changing health coverage rules that differ from plan to plan, year to year, and even within the same year. When coverage of insulin changes within the same year, "it places a burden on people with diabetes and providers and may have a negative health impact," according to the report.

A Sanofi spokesperson said the amount Sanofi receives for insulin has been falling for six consecutive years.

"Sanofi supports state efforts to cap monthly co-pays for covered insulin," spokesperson Sally Bain said. "We also support legislation that would require rebates to be shared at the pharmacy counter, require plans to cover insulin without applying a deductible, and prohibit plans from imposing a higher co-pay than its net cost after manufacturer rebates."

An Eli Lilly spokesperson provided a statement from the company that said, "Lilly agrees insulin should be affordable to anyone who needs it." The statement said Lilly has created a program that makes anyone using its insulin eligible to purchase a monthly prescription for \$35. It said people with lower incomes or in desperate need can get Lilly insulin at no charge.

Novo Nordisk and Sanofi also have programs that offer insulin at low or no cost to those who qualify.

But the Texas Association of Health Plans said in a news release that "copay cap mandates will not stop these unjustified price hikes or lower the cost of insulin" and would allow "Big Pharma" to continue raising insulin prices without transparency or accountability.

The association said that "some states have turned to the mandates as a quick political win," and it instead supports legislation such as HB 18, which "targets the real problem — high out-of-pocket costs for the uninsured" and lowers the price of insulin without shifting additional costs to employers.

Texas Employers for Insurance Reform, which advocates driving down the costs of health insurance, also opposes SB 827. The organization said in a news release that the bill "places another expensive unfunded mandate on health insurance that will increase premiums and cause more Texas to go without health insurance."

The organization said the bill would take a critical choice away from employers and Texans in choosing the type of insurance they will need.

"The real solution is to attack the high cost of insulin and not place caps on out-of-pocket expenses," the release said. "By lowering the cost of insulin, which continues to go up even though it has been around for decades without generic competition, consumers are helped with more affordable alternatives."

Verma, the American Diabetes Association volunteer who is a small-business owner from Houston, said it's important to remember that diabetes is a chronic condition that requires several other expenses, including blood sugar testing supplies, medical visits and mental health services. She said her continuous glucose monitor alone costs her an extra \$3,000 a year.

"It goes all the way down to the types of shoes you wear, because we have circulation problems in our feet over time," Verma said. "If you add that to the rising cost of insulin, there's no way we can afford all of that and live that healthy lifestyle."

The average list price of insulin nearly tripled between 2002 and 2013, according to a 2018 study by the American Diabetes Association. An analysis of the bill by state Sen. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, said the rising costs led to people rationing their insulin, which jeopardizes their health and safety. In the analysis, Kolkhorst also said the rate of adults in Texas diagnosed with diabetes is above the national average. Nearly 2.7 million adult Texans were estimated to have a diabetes diagnosis in 2018, according to survey data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Bill allows forced posting of 'In God We Trust'

May 26, 2021 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Looks like God is just a gubernatorial autograph away from making something of a comeback in Texas public schools.

You know the deal about religion and public schools. Touchy topic. Some people think never the twain should meet. I, for one, think we need more religion in public schools: teaching about it, not preaching about it.

I think a mandatory comparative religion course, properly taught, would go a long way to constructively helping us to learn about one another's faith or lack thereof. Regardless of your take on religion, there's no doubting its influence on America. It's hard to believe you can learn about any society without learning about its religions.

Here's a fact about God and government: Since 1956, our nation's official motto has been "In God We Trust." I'll let you discuss among yourselves whether such a motto would be approved today. The word "kerfuffle" comes to mind.

This brings us to Senate Bill 797, which won final House approval Tuesday, sending it to Gov. Greg Abbott, who's sure to sign it. Current state law says a public school or institution of higher education "may display the United States national motto, 'In God We Trust.'"

SB 797 says those public institutions "must display" the motto and do so "in a conspicuous place in each building of the school or institution a durable place in each building a durable poster or framed copy" of the motto.

But, and here's an odd twist, the actual decision on whether to display the motto wouldn't be made by school officials. It would be made by nonschool officials, perhaps and probably including some with a particular religious bent. SB 797 says the motto must be displayed if paid for by a nonschool source. Using school funds is verboten. The bill says the display also must include representations of the Texas and U.S. flags.

On April 19, the Senate OK'd the bill by Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, by what was recorded as a unanimous vote on a lengthy local and uncontested calendar (the kind when there are few senators in the chamber) that also included approval of designating San Marcos as the state's official mermaid capital and the Bowie knife as the state's official knife.

That sent it to the House Public Education Committee where Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress, presented it on May 4. He told the committee the bill would obviate the "whole conversation" that happens at the local level when somebody wants the motto posted in a school.

"So, I think in many ways it actually makes the conversation simpler," he said.

By "simpler" I think he meant "nonexistent."

State Republican Executive Committee member Tom Nobis of Houston was the only person who testified at the committee hearing.

"Patriotism and national pride have been waning in the past years," he said. "Display of the national motto, 'In God We Trust,' in schools will help rectify this situation."

And, Nobis said, there's this: "Establishing this national motto occurred during the Cold War as a weapon against communism."

"Life comes from God and without him there's nothing," Nobis added. "We were conceived under God, and we flourish under God. And we turn our backs on God to our own peril."

No witnesses testified against the bill, but several, including representatives of Texas Impact and the League of Women Voters of Texas, registered against it.

From there, the bill hit a speed bump, failing to win committee approval May 11 when Chairman Harold Dutton, D-Houston, voted nay, and Reps. Alma Allen, D-Houston, Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, Mary González, D-Clint, and James Talarico, D-Round Rock, opted for present not voting.

On May 17, with Dutton switching to aye, the committee sent the bill to the full House. It came up for initial review Monday when Oliverson briefly explained it, and Rep. Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin, tried to put "some boundaries on the size of the display."

"A donor could ostensibly provide a 3-foot-by-3-foot frame display or even a 5-foot-by-5-foot," she said.

That, she indicated, could be too much of a God thing. Her amendment called for limiting the display to a maximum of 196 square inches, which, she helpfully noted, would be 14 inches by 14 inches in square format.

"Teachers often use the walls of their room, whether in a building or a portable, to display student work or teaching material," Goodwin told colleagues. "These displays of student work serve multiple purposes, from building students' confidence, to giving examples of good work, to beautifying the classroom. I want to be sure there's plenty of wall space available for student work, in addition to the national motto being displayed."

Oliverson was unimpressed. "You've got to have both flags and the motto all together," he said of the bill's mandates. "I just think it's too small."

Goodwin made one more plea: "I think that it's important to have the kids' work displayed on walls, and learning materials. And I just don't want to overburden the classrooms with the motto. So I think that we ought to have a size boundary in the bill."

The House did not. Goodwin's amendment failed in a nonrecord vote and the bill was approved Monday in a voice vote that sent it to Tuesday's 106-35 final vote that then sent it to Abbott.

Goodwin failed Tuesday with an amendment saying the display would have to be in "at least one" and not "each" building on a campus.

The House also rejected an amendment by Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos, D-Richardson, who wanted to allow parents to petition for a vote on whether the display should be posted. "It is not our responsibility to impose Christian nationalism on any individual," Ramos said, "especially children in our public schools."

Oliverson alerted Ramos to the notion that God is not solely a Christian concept.

As with all new laws, now we wait to see what happens. Will we see some displays of ungodly size?

As I See It

Ken Herman

Austin American-Statesman

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Abbott signs legislation banning reality cop shows - Law is named for man killed during filming

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Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law Wednesday a bill banning TV reality shows from partnering with law enforcement agencies. The Javier Ambler Law is named for a man who died in an encounter with Williamson County deputies in March 2019, as the high-rated program "Live PD" filmed.

The Legislature had overwhelmingly passed the measure before the bipartisan proposal was sent to Abbott's desk last week. Amid a national conversation about policing in America, Texas is the first state to ban programs, such as the now-defunct "COPS" and "Live PD," which came under scrutiny in the aftermath of Javier Ambler II's death and the murder of George Floyd.

"Javier Ambler was killed because Williamson County deputies were encouraged to produce exciting reality television instead of simply protecting and serving the public," the Ambler family said in a statement. "As a consequence of this unconscionable decision by the county and its sheriff, a beloved father and son was senselessly killed."

The law, which was introduced by state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, is the latest result of an ongoing investigation by the American-Statesman and KVUE-TV, which first revealed details of Ambler's death in June.

Deputies J.J. Johnson and Zach Camden, both of whom had "Live PD" crews in their patrol cars, launched a vehicle pursuit after Ambler failed to dim his headlights. During the 22-minute chase that crossed county lines, Ambler crashed his car several times before it became disabled in North Austin. Johnson and Camden then used Tasers on the 400-pound former football player multiple times as he cried out that he had a heart condition and could not breathe.

In subsequent months, prosecutors opened an investigation into the destruction of "Live PD" footage of Ambler's death, which resulted in evidence tampering charges against former Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody and former Williamson County general counsel Jason Nassour in both Williamson and Travis counties. Prosecutors have not disclosed what steps they are alleged to have taken concerning the video, but attorneys for Chody, who lost his reelection bid last year, and Nassour say they committed no crime.

Johnson and Camden, who no longer work for the department, also face manslaughter charges in Travis County.

The Statesman and KVUE uncovered multiple other violent encounters during "Live PD's" Williamson County run, including the arrest of a man through a "no-knock" warrant, in which officers busted down the door of his father's home and dragged him outside on national TV.

The newspaper also revealed how violent encounters between deputies and civilians, particularly minorities, rose during the 18-month "Live PD" partnership, as did the number of car chases.

Producers canceled "Live PD" two days after news broke about Ambler's death. In recent months, however, they have hinted on social media that they are working to get the show back on air.

GOP revives bill limiting race discussion - Critics call procedures used unconstitutional

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"It's ironic that

Lt. Gov. Patrick ignored the Texas Constitution to revive a bill about civics."

Rep. James Talarico

Republican senators sprang into action Friday night to resurrect a GOP bill limiting how race can be discussed in the classroom, paving over a roadblock thrown up by a Round Rock Democrat in the House.

House Bill 3979 was endangered late Friday afternoon when Rep. James Talarico blocked a pending vote by successfully arguing that amendments added in the Senate violated House rules.

The bill was returned to the Senate, where Republicans acted quickly to address the procedural problem Friday night by stripping all Senate changes from HB 3979 and declaring the bill to have passed the Senate in the same form it was received from the House.

The party-line 18-13 vote came over the objection of Democrats, who argued that bills may not be passed after the midnight Wednesday deadline as set by the Texas Constitution, but Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick overruled their objections.

Talarico accused Patrick of bending to the pressure of "conservative megadonors" who favor the bill to revive a measure that micromanages teachers and stifles conversations about race in social studies and civics courses.

"It's ironic that Lt. Gov. Patrick ignored the Texas Constitution to revive a bill about civics," Talarico said.

Afterward, Patrick took to Twitter to declare that the Senate saved the bill and put it on the "glide path" to Gov. Greg Abbott.

But the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition called the Senate action, known as a motion to recede, an unprecedented and possibly unconstitutional move.

"The actions taken in the Senate tonight reveal just how politically motivated this piece of legislation actually is, and just how far removed it is from the real lives of teachers and students in Texas," the coalition, which focuses on racial equality, said in a statement.

The Republican authors of the broad legislation say it aims to prevent political agendas in schools and to ensure teachers present "diverse and contending perspectives."

But education advocates have rallied against it, warning it would hinder discussions of history and current events and could prevent student civic engagement by banning schools from granting credit for student work with organizations that participate in political advocacy.

HB 3979 also would prohibit schools from accepting donations to develop curriculum grounded in the ideas of critical race theory and from mandating staff training or discussions with those ideas.

The legislation does not mention the theory, but its proponents have joined Republican calls against the academic

framework focused on challenging systemic racism and white supremacy.

The Senate passed HB 3979 last week, adding a civics training program for teachers with an estimated price tag of nearly \$15 million annually starting in 2023, according to the Texas Education Agency.

On Friday afternoon, Talarico questioned the bill's author, Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, for pushing the bill forward despite a Senate committee's decision to wipe out several Democratic amendments that aimed to condemn white supremacy and prevent the "white-washing of history."

"So is it fair to say that whoever removed that important language in the Senate condemning white supremacy does not want the history of white supremacy to be taught, and/or does not want our teachers to tell our students that white supremacy is morally wrong?" Talarico asked Toth, noting he could have instead opted for a conference committee of lawmakers from both chambers to hash out differences.

Toth said Democrats such as Sen. Royce West of Dallas could have added language like that back in the Senate, but Talarico pressed on before raising a point of order challenging the bill.

"Why would anyone who believes white supremacy is wrong remove the part of the bill that says white supremacy is wrong?" Talarico said, leaving Toth speechless for a moment.

"It's ironic that

Lt. Gov. Patrick ignored the Texas Constitution to revive a bill about civics."

Rep. James Talarico

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Critical race theory fuels debate in Texas - GOP lawmakers limit teaching on its ideas

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Propelled by Republicans and conservative leaders, an obscure academic pursuit sometimes known as "critical race theory" has exploded into the political realm, driving policy debates and confrontations in the volatile arena of race relations in America.

Like many on the right, Gov. Greg Abbott has rejected the theory — which explores how racism and racial inequity shaped the nation — as a harmful overreaction that worsens racial strife.

With the Legislature set to return for a special session that starts Thursday, it is time, Abbott told lawmakers, to "abolish" critical race theory from Texas.

So, what is critical race theory?

First developed more than 40 years ago, the theory provides a framework for understanding how racial disparities developed and endure, according to Prudence Carter, an education professor at the University of California-Berkeley.

The idea was to move beyond thinking that racism is merely confined to individuals mistreating one another by recognizing "that there are actual structures in our society that create these different kinds of racial gaps and racial disparities — economically, in terms of housing, in terms of education," Carter told "PBS NewsHour" recently.

For Kimberlé Crenshaw, a scholar who helped to create the theory, it connects past and present.

"It's an approach to grappling with a history of white supremacy that rejects the belief that what's in the past is in the past, and that the laws and systems that grow from that past are detached from it," she told Time magazine.

To many conservatives, however, viewing history through the prism of race leads to an inevitable, distorted and dangerous conclusion: That America is a racist nation.

Such a focus undermines civic unity and promotes hatred of country — emphasizing what divides instead of unites Americans, they say.

"Our nation is founded on the idea that all men are created equal," said Attorney General Ken Paxton, a vocal critic of the theory. "We have fought for and secured this belief over the course of our history, and that unity must continue, not be forced back into the single, distorted lens of race."

A sustained attack

Conservatives nationwide have been mounting a sustained and growing attack on critical race theory over the past year, with conservative media leading the drumbeat.

Commentators and analysts on Fox News, for example, have uttered the phrase "critical race theory" almost 1,300 times in less than four months in 2021, including a high of 224 times in one week in early June, according to Media Matters for America, a left-wing media watchdog.

Spurred by the onslaught, governors in six Republican-led states have signed into law legislation to limit how race

can be taught in the classroom, arguing that critical race theory is being used as a platform to provoke racial divisions.

Texas joined the party when lawmakers, split largely along party lines, passed a similar effort, House Bill 3979, during the recent regular session.

Debate over the Texas bill showed just how divided lawmakers are on the subject, disagreeing even on what the theory means.

The bill's author, Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, called critical race theory a form of Marxist ideology used to indoctrinate youths.

"Critical race theory rejects our constitutional liberties and the rule of law as a disguise for the selfish interests of a supposedly white supremacist American society," he told House members.

"HB 3979 is about teaching racial harmony by telling the truth that we are all equal, both in God's eyes and our founding documents," he added.

Rep. Mary González, D-Clint, received a doctorate degree from the University of Texas based largely on studying critical race theory — and she believes many of her Republican colleagues have corrupted its meaning for political gain.

CRT, as González calls it, offers a lens to analyze and understand society, and she said it saved her life by helping her navigate the class, race and gender discrimination she's experienced.

"They say this is a theory based in hate, and it's the opposite. It's a theory based in love and compassion," González said.

The goal is to promote healing, she said.

"There's an assumption that CRT is only for people of color. CRT is for everybody, because everybody is impacted by racism, and everybody is impacted by oppression. Don't we want to live in a society where people are treated equally?" González said. "And if so, having a firm understanding of history and truth is essential to that."

Almost no common ground

The House floor debate on an amendment to HB 3979 in May provided a look into just how far apart Republican and Democratic perspectives are on critical race theory.

Toth proposed amending his bill to place an additional condition on classroom instruction — requiring slavery and racism to be portrayed as betrayals of, and deviations from, the founding principles of the United States, "which include liberty and equality."

Toth said critical race theory unfairly paints the nation as founded in racism when the opposite was true, making it important for students to understand the nation's values as revealed by its founding documents.

When Rep. Nicole Collier, D-Fort Worth, suggested that Toth was trying to "whitewash" history by shifting attention away from slavery and other uncomfortable issues, he disagreed.

"This amendment clearly states is that there was a failure on the part of Americans to live up to the values of the founding documents," Toth told the House. "Slavery was a deviation. Slavery was evil. Slavery was wrong."

"Agreed," Collier said. "But slavery was codified in the founding documents. It was actually written in the founding documents."

In response, Toth quoted from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Collier, who is Black, interrupted: "Yes, except for African Americans at the time."

'Three-fifths of a person'

"Where in the Constitution does it talk about slavery?" Toth asked Collier, adding that "the founding fathers did not want the word slavery in the Constitution was because they felt that it would stain the document."

Collier read from Article 1, Section 2, which says "free persons" shall be fully counted to determine representation and taxes, while all others would be counted as three-fifths of a person.

"The founding principles considered me to be three-fifths of a person," she said. "The authentic founding principles of the United States included ownership of other humans. That was included in their principles. So I'm not sure which revised history you're looking at."

"No, all men and women are created equal. We hold these truths to be self-evident," Toth said. "That's the aspirational goal."

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, joined the fray, saying it's not enough to teach good intentions.

"Your lengthy bill about civics (instruction) makes no effort to teach the history of racism or white supremacy and its impact on the founding of our country politically, socially, economically," he said. "The only thing you're doing is preventing us from talking about race in a way that makes you uncomfortable."

Toth defended the amendment and the context in which it places discussions of slavery and racism.

"It says we were flawed. It says it was a betrayal of what the founding nation was all about," he insisted.

"I would like our amendment to teach the history of white supremacy ... and teach students that it is morally wrong," Talarico said.

"Slavery and the history of slavery is immoral and wrong, and we need to continue to say that," Toth replied.

The amendment was adopted on a largely party-line vote.

HB 3979 was sent to Abbott on June 1, and he signed it into law two weeks later, praising the bill as "a strong move to abolish critical race theory in Texas."

"But," he added, "more must be done," vowing to add the issue to a special session.

About this story

This story is the first in a three-part series taking a look at critical race theory and how the political fallout is affecting Texas.

Coming Monday: What the backlash against critical race theory could mean for Texas social studies lessons.

Coming Tuesday: Students share their experiences learning about race in public schools.

Texas GOP mulls race legislation - Republicans look to expand limits on teaching racism to any subject

July 16, 2021 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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[OpenURL Link](#)

State senators are considering new legislation that would expand recently passed restrictions on social studies courses in public grade schools, despite concerns from educators and the absence of most Texas House Democrats that has brought lawmaking in that chamber to a halt.

It's the latest GOP push to restrict the teaching of critical race theory, a framework used to examine racism in colleges and universities that has become a Republican catch-all term for what some see as divisive efforts to address racism and inequity in schools.

During the regular legislative session that ended in May, Republicans rallied to pass House Bill 3979, which limits how teachers can discuss race and current events in social studies courses and bars them from awarding students course credit for social or political advocacy work.

The new law, slated to go into effect in September, says teachers may not be compelled to discuss current events or controversial topics of public policy. If they do discuss such a topic, they must explore it from "diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective."

But Gov. Greg Abbott called lawmakers back to the Capitol on July 8 to work on Republican priorities left pending after House Democrats' walkout at the end of the regular session. As part of the special session agenda, Abbott asked lawmakers to continue the work started in HB 3979.

The Senate State Affairs committee, chaired by Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, met Thursday to hear public comment on Senate Bill 3, a broad measure expanding HB 3979's restrictions to any subject in grades K-12, including ethnic studies courses.

After hearing testimony from around 70 people, the majority of whom opposed the legislation, the committee approved it 6-1 with the only Democrat present, Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr. of Brownsville, voting no.

Required texts

In his call for the special session, Abbott told lawmakers to work on legislation "similar to" HB 3979 "as originally passed by the Texas Senate" during the regular legislative session.

The Senate's previous version of HB 3979, also introduced by Hughes, struck out amendments from House Democrats listing various underrepresented figures and civil rights movements to be required in the social studies curriculum standards set by the State Board of Education.

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, also added an amendment to teach the United States' history of white supremacy as "morally wrong."

Those amendments were included in the final version of HB 3979 when Democrats killed the Senate version on a procedural technicality.

Like the Senate's previous version of HB 3979, Hughes' latest effort, SB 3, omits those amendments and requires teaching the founding documents and "excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America."

It would also require:

The transcript of the first Lincoln-Douglas debate.

The Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery.

The 14th Amendment, which gave former slaves citizenship and the right to vote.

The 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote.

The historic relationship between Texas and Mexico and "the diversity of the Hispanic population in Texas."

Some civics skills such as the ability to "determine the reliability of information sources."

It maintains a ban on the 1619 Project, an initiative from The New York Times examining the role and legacy of slavery in the founding of the United States.

SB 3 also orders the Texas Education Commissioner to create a civics training program for educators to be reviewed by the State Board of Education annually.

One teacher and one administrator from each school campus would be required to attend the civics training, which would focus on teaching media literacy, conducting guided discussions of current events and "simulations" of government under the new restrictions imposed.

A civics training program previously proposed by Hughes in the regular session came with an estimated price tag of nearly \$15 million annually starting in 2023, according to the Texas Education Agency.

Amid confusion, Hughes also noted his legislation would not add any new enforcements or penalties for teachers, leaving in place the current grievance process.

Concerns remain

On Thursday, Hughes and State Board of Education leaders sought to clarify that the figures and civil rights movements removed from the section of required texts in the bill would not be banned.

"Those are going to be taught," Hughes said. "This bill is intended to provide a broad framework."

Keven Ellis, chair of the State Board of Education, told lawmakers he did not believe the bill would ban anything in the curriculum standards adopted by the board, including for its courses on African American and Mexican American studies. But he suggested adding an amendment to clarify that.

"We will continue to bring forward those courses and teach that history," Ellis said of the state's ethnic studies courses, noting the board has also called for courses focusing on Native Americans and Asian-Pacific Islanders.

Still, educators and advocates expressed concerns over the removal of those figures and historical events and the restrictions on discussions of race and gender, saying it could have a "chilling" effect for teachers confused by the legislation.

"How are teachers to do their job if they can't facilitate the conversations because a teacher, in this legislation, feels that the only permission is to allow the student conversation?" said Carrie Griffith, a policy specialist for the Texas State Teachers Association.

Renee Blackmon, president of the Texas Council for the Social Studies, told the American-Statesman she appreciated the effort to invest in civics education but noted opportunities for students to be engaged in civics could remain limited under the restrictions against student advocacy.

"We might be taking some steps towards some good civics education, but it won't be as robust as it could be," she said.

SB 3 clarifies students could engage in nonpartisan, community-based projects such as work with community gardens and food banks as part of classes.

Some people, including residents from the Leander and Eanes school districts, spoke in favor of the legislation. The Leander residents cited concerns over optional books included in lists for a student book club program that they disliked.

Texas Dems seek Senate support on voting rights - Manchin meets with Democratic lawmakers

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[OpenURL Link](#)

WASHINGTON – U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin told a group of Texas Democratic lawmakers trying to stop GOP voting restrictions in their home state that he supports fundamental voting rights, but he gave no indication he'll back his party's efforts on Capitol Hill to stop states from enacting their own election laws.

"We've all come to a total agreement that what we want is basically to protect voting rights," he told reporters after the roughly hourlong meeting Thursday.

Manchin expressed his support for the decades-old Voting Rights Act, telling reporters the best way to ensure the "guardrails on democracy" would be to build on the 1965 law and the changes that have been adopted through the decades.

Though not unexpected, Manchin's response likely will disappoint many fellow Democrats on Capitol Hill and around the nation pushing Washington to stop red states like Texas from enacting tough voter restrictions amid former President Donald Trump's baseless claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 elections.

Democrats have looked to Congress — and Manchin specifically — as their line of defense to stop those measures. But Manchin isn't sold on the broad scope of the federal legislation, known as the For The People Act, or on eliminating the Senate filibuster that currently prevents the measure — which has no Republican support — from becoming law.

"Joe Manchin is the last hope we have. It's the Obi-Wan Kenobi, right? You're my only hope," said Texas Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock, who did not attend Thursday's meeting. "All Joe Manchin has to do is make one exception to one Senate rule to save democracy. It's so easy. It's such a light lift, and it should've happened yesterday."

Manchin has consistently — and emphatically — said there's no circumstance where he would eliminate the filibuster, the rule that requires 60 of the 100 senators to agree to move an item to the floor for a final vote if anyone objects. Because Democrats occupy only 50 seats, very little can pass without at least 10 Republicans.

Manchin has said he fears doing away with the filibuster would set off a partisan see-saw every time the chamber switched hands.

"Yes, this process can be frustrating and slow. It will force compromises that are not always ideal," he wrote in a June 6 op-ed for the Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette-Mail.

"But consider the alternative," he wrote. "Do we really want to live in an America where one party can dictate and demand everything and anything it wants, whenever it wants? I have always said, "If I can't go home and explain it, I can't vote for it." And I cannot explain strictly partisan election reform or blowing up the Senate rules to expedite one party's agenda."

Lately, there's been a push to end the filibuster just for issues associated with voting rights.

Texas Democrats who walked out

The Democrats who came to Capitol Hill from Texas say it's the only way to stop the GOP-controlled Legislature from enacting voting restrictions they say will make it harder for voter, especially those of color, to cast ballots.

While they did not get Manchin to budge on the filibuster, state Sen. Sen. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas, said after the meeting that he's optimistic the attention the lawmakers' trip to Washington has garnered could lead to a breakthrough back home.

"I do think there's a possibility that, as soon as next month, we may see some compromise bill come out of Texas that could give Republicans the sense that they've achieved something in the way of faith in elections while still recognizing the importance and the concerns that Democrats have with ensuring that everybody can vote," he said.

More than 50 Texas Democrats have been in Washington since they flew in late Monday. About a dozen attended the meeting with Manchin. While not only giving them a chance to personally lobby such key senators as Manchin, the gambit temporarily denies Republicans a quorum during a special session Gov. Greg Abbott called to pass sweeping GOP voting overhaul bills.

Last month, Manchin became the only Senate Democrat not to support the For The People Act, a broad bill designed to expand ballot access and make voting easier.

Manchin said he's not surprised no Republicans had signed on to the measure.

"You know why?" he told reporters Thursday. "Because they've had a bill that's 800 pages long. They've had everything thrown at him. Let's get back to the basic rights of voting, protecting voting rights. That's it."

Last month, Manchin released a list of voting rights proposals he could support, such as minimum standards for early voting and a federal holiday for election day, but also backed voter ID requirements which many Democrats generally oppose. So far, the For the People Act remains in limbo.

President Joe Biden implored Congress to act to stop "this broad assault against voting rights" during a speech Tuesday in Philadelphia.

"It's no longer just about who gets to vote or making it easier for eligible voters to vote," he said, referring to some state laws being considered or enacted. "It's about who gets to count the vote, who gets to count whether or not your vote counted at all."

The filibuster rule could be eliminated with a simple majority vote, a step Democrats could take if all 50 supported it, forcing a tie that Vice President Kamala Harris would break in their favor. But Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., both have expressed deep reservations about such a move.

American-Statesman reporter Nicole Cobler contributed to this report.

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STATESMAN EXCLUSIVETEXAS DEMOCRATS IN DC - Secret meetings, phone trees - Story behind how Dems planned an exodus

July 25, 2021 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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WASHINGTON — State Rep. John Bucy III was running on no sleep.

The Austin Democrat had just spent 23 hours in the basement of the Texas Capitol, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with his House colleagues as they listened to hours of emotional testimony from members of the public about the latest iteration of a divisive GOP-backed election bill at the center of the special session agenda.

By the time he left the hearing and stepped into the early morning sun July 11, members of his party were at their wits' end with Republican lawmakers and their relentless pursuit of election law changes that Democrats say would create significant barriers to the ballot box and disenfranchise voters of color. Republicans say the effort is designed to crack down on fraud and restore election integrity.

Democrats had killed a similar measure 42 days earlier, when they walked off the floor of the Texas House chamber in the final hours of the regular legislative session. But even as they celebrated the bill's demise, conversations about how to fight the proposal during the inevitable special session had already started behind closed doors.

By the time the House Select Committee on Constitutional Rights and Remedies approved the revised version of the legislation on that first Sunday of the special session by a vote of 9-5, with Bucy joining all other Democrats on the committee in voting no, talk of a second quorum break among Democrats had already reached a fever pitch.

Bucy closed his eyes for a few hours after the hearing before his phone started to ring, flashing Driftwood Rep. Erin Zwiener's name. She told him: Pack a 45-pound suitcase and one carry-on bag. Be ready to leave the next day.

The call was the final step of a hastily hatched plan to convince at least 51 of the state's 67 Democratic lawmakers to not only break quorum for the second time in five weeks, but to board two planes headed to an unknown destination without a clear end date in mind.

Interviews with more than a dozen state lawmakers from their Washington hotel in the days after the quorum break reveal exactly how secret meetings, phone trees and a covert rendezvous at the local plumbers union catapulted Texas House Democrats into the spotlight and the center of a national fight over voting rights.

'Extreme circumstances'

Breaking quorum in the Texas House involves extensive planning. The last-resort tactic requires vacating the state to deny the majority party enough members to conduct business while avoiding the reach of Texas law enforcement officers who lack jurisdiction outside the state to compel the lawmakers to return to work.

Conversations about leaving in July started in earnest once Democrats killed the election bill during the regular session. It was immediately clear that Gov. Greg Abbott planned to create a new opportunity to move the bill forward by convening a special session with the election bill and other conservative priorities on the agenda, including further limiting teaching about racism in public schools, expanding abortion restrictions and banning transgender girls from competing in girls sports.

"I believe, as bad as some of these other bills are that are on the call, if it was an effort to try to get 51 or more members to walk on any of those other ones, I don't think we would have been able to break quorum," Austin Rep.

Eddie Rodriguez said from Washington. "It's under extreme circumstances."

In the weeks ahead of the special session, caucus members met in different-size groups to discuss their options and the prospect of crossing state lines. During at least one meeting, members conducted a secret straw poll and had to indicate whether they'd be willing to be gone for up to 30 days — the length of a special session — and if so, whether they thought it should happen before or after the start of the special session.

Questions of timing and destination would continue to hound Democrats as they planned for their departure. Timing, in particular, was an early challenge because the longer leaders took to make a decision, the greater the risk that news of their plans would leak to the media and Republican leaders at the Capitol.

"Vacating the floor for basically an hour and 15 minutes before the midnight deadline was a big deal — don't get me wrong — but didn't require anywhere near the level of planning and logistical operation that moving over 50 members out of state for an extended period of time did," said Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, the chairman of the House Democratic Caucus. "It took a lot of really meticulous planning and evaluating contingencies and really trying to ascertain what was possible, what was doable, and identifying the right time to do it."

'A cold anger'

By the first weekend of the special session, the plan had started to crystalize. Members were closely watching committee hearings and whether Republicans would accept changes from Democrats to address what they saw as the most egregious provisions of the legislation. None of the seven committee amendments proposed in the House hearing was adopted, and the bill moved forward as written.

Democrats worried that history would repeat itself. In the regular legislative session, Republicans made last-minute changes to the bill behind closed doors, including adding provisions that hadn't been discussed publicly.

"There was a hurt that really became more of a cold anger," said Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, a key figure in the quorum break who worked closely with Turner to determine where members stood on the issue and how Democrats should spend their time while outside Texas.

"When African American and Latino lawmakers came to me on a Saturday ... I knew right away that there was a motivated group of men and women who were ready to go," he said.

Turner tapped Martinez Fischer and eight other lawmakers to meet and outline a plan. This core group, which represented people from different backgrounds and districts, would eventually grow to 15 and sprout into a phone tree. Each member was assigned a handful of other lawmakers to contact to take temperatures and relay information about travel plans.

At that point, the destination was still undetermined. Some members saw New Mexico as a logical option, close to home with affordable accommodations and Democratic leadership. For Martinez Fischer and many of his allies in the House, Washington was the obvious destination because of the national fight happening over voting rights.

"I had some very built-in views already of what I think needed to happen," Martinez Fischer said of his early conversations with Turner and other organizers. "I would participate, but I wasn't going to be part of a conversation that was going to try to take my focus away from what I thought we needed to do."

With so many voices and perspectives, Turner's job orchestrating the quorum bust became that much harder. He described the process of listening to more than 60 voices explain drastically different personal, political and professional stakes, including familial responsibilities to elderly relatives or young children and day jobs outside of the Legislature that require attention. Members in competitive districts worried about how constituents back home could view the quorum bust.

"No two members are in the same circumstance," Turner said. "We've tried to stay on top of that as best you can

and help support people as best you can and listen to their feedback and hear their concerns."

Packing their bags

As Democrats were alerted of the impending quorum break plan, Bucy persuaded leaders to let him in on the destination. He planned to spend the sojourn with his wife, Molly, who was 27 weeks pregnant, as well as his 17-month-old daughter Bradley.

"I'm committed to doing this, but I need to figure out the logistics of the family," he recalled telling Zwiener and Turner. "Once it became clear that we might be coming all the way to D.C., it just seemed really too far for my wife to be able to travel by herself with the baby."

Bucy spent the next 12 hours planning their departure. He and his wife made arrangements for Bentley, the family dog, and packed a week's worth of clothes, toys and diapers for Bradley.

They climbed into their blue Jeep Cherokee at 1 a.m. Monday, July 12, more than 10 hours before Bucy's Democratic colleagues would board a coach bus bound for Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, where two chartered planes awaited.

By 7 a.m., Bucy and his family had made it to a Sonic "somewhere in Arkansas" for breakfast. They let Bradley run around on the playground attached to the restaurant for 30 minutes.

While the Bucys made their way across the country, Democrats in Austin geared up to meet at 11 a.m. at the Plumbers and Pipefitters Local Union 286 on Airport Boulevard, which was close to the airport with a parking lot large enough for the lawmakers to leave their cars.

Round Rock Rep. James Talarico packed a large suitcase that his dad, Mark, a retired salesman, had rushed over Sunday night. He spent his waning hours in Austin scrambling to fill prescriptions for additional insulin to manage his Type 1 diabetes.

"I didn't know if we'd be near a pharmacy where I'd be able to get it," Talarico said. "I feel like people just think politicians are like robots. We have medication we have to get. We have family needs we have to take care of, and to do it on short notice is a big ask."

Talarico's father dropped him off at the rendezvous point that morning and told his son he was proud of him.

"That's really all you need," Talarico said.

By the time Talarico and the rest of the Democrats reached the union building Monday morning, members of the media had caught wind of their plans, and lawmakers dodged calls from reporters while making final arrangements for travel.

They were greeted at the union building with turkey sandwiches and a stack of letters for each member to sign directing staffers to lock the voting machine on each of their desks on the House floor to prevent any funny business. The move would ensure that when the body gavelled into session Tuesday morning, there wouldn't be a quorum. After 57 members affixed their signatures, a Democratic staffer drove the letters the 31/2 miles back to the Capitol.

Lawmakers also dropped their car keys into waiting envelopes that were delivered to their staffers staying behind in Austin, so they could pick up their vehicles from the parking lot.

Finally, moments before they boarded a coach bus bound for the airport, the caucus leadership told the group that they were headed to Washington to lobby members of Congress to pass voting rights legislation that would override some of the restrictions contemplated in the Texas voting bills.

"Honestly, I didn't know how we were being transported, where we were being transported to until we were on the bus," Austin Rep. Vikki Goodwin said, adding that when she found out that they were headed to Washington she regretted not packing more suits. "Unfortunately, I didn't pack the best things."

Democrats were giddy with excitement, and a case of Miller Lite rested just two seats from Rep. Julie Johnson of Farmers Branch as she snapped a selfie from the bus and shared it on Twitter.

It's unclear whether the beer was brought on the bus by a union worker or a Capitol aide or a lawmaker. What's certain is that the image spread across the internet. Republicans and critics of the walkout used the beer as ammunition in social media posts, saying Democrats were on vacation and leaving their jobs behind. Some nicknamed the fugitive Democrats the "Miller D's," an allusion to Democratic quorum busts in 1979 and 2003 when members were dubbed the "Killer Bees" and then the "Killer D's."

The lawmakers boarded two private planes early Monday afternoon as dozens of reporters watched from the road. Even as the delta variant of the coronavirus was spreading in Texas, the vaccinated lawmakers were seen in photos from the plane not wearing masks. They were bound for Dulles International Airport.

During the flight, Goodwin, who was pictured in the bus selfie, sent the photo to her husband. He quipped that he had already seen the image all over the internet, and Democrats realized that they'd been photographed with a case of beer. Johnson scrambled to delete the photo with limited Wi-Fi.

"A lot of members are just embarrassed that it wasn't Shiner that was on the plane," Turner said with a grin. "It's one of those things that is a minor blip. What's important for me, for our members and for our staff is to continually remind ourselves why we left, why we're here and what it's about. It's about protecting the freedom to vote."

Washington arrival

From the Washington Plaza Hotel on Wednesday, chosen because of its proximity to Capitol Hill and the availability of rooms, Zwiener sat crisscross on one bed while her 3-year-old daughter, Lark, nestled under the covers of another. Lark shoved her tiny finger into a bag of Cheetos, occasionally wiping the orange dust from her fingers onto the white bedsheets while her mom glanced toward the ceaseless buzzing of her iPhone.

Lark and her mother were taking a moment to regroup after a long day on Capitol Hill, bouncing from congressional office to congressional office to push for federal legislation that many Democrats say is their last hope to stop the Republican voting measure in Texas and undo similar measures in other red states.

Over the next hour, Lark, wearing a red, white and blue dress, cycled through her puzzles, colorful blocks and dolls — all of which her mother had managed to jam into their suitcases as she furiously packed over the weekend in preparation for their weeks-long trip to Washington.

The small room is likely to be their home for the remainder of July. Zwiener said she couldn't imagine spending the month away from Lark, so she and her husband, Quincy, decided that it would be easiest for Zwiener to take their daughter to Washington, where he could fly to visit without the stress of taking Lark on frequent flights.

"Some of the logistical factors were that we were not very comfortable putting her on a commercial plane at this point," she said, citing the rising COVID-19 cases. "Putting her on a plane with my Democratic colleagues? We are all vaccinated. The only person who was not vaccinated on that flight was her, the 3-year-old. There was a safety factor for me."

They filled each day in Washington that first week with interviews, press conferences and meetings on Capitol Hill to pressure Congress to pass the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act.

They also met with Vice President Kamala Harris, who expressed support for their cause.

But all eyes were on their Thursday meeting with U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va.

Manchin and Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema are pivotal to passing the voting rights legislation, but so far they've opposed efforts to craft a way around the filibuster.

"Joe Manchin is the last hope we have," Talarico said as he waited to hear from his colleagues. "It's the Obi-Wan Kenobi, right? 'You're my only hope.' All Joe Manchin has to do is make one exception to one Senate rule to save democracy. It's so easy. It's such a light lift, and it should've happened yesterday."

In his meeting with 13 Texas House and Senate Democrats, Manchin didn't indicate whether he was prepared to budge. Just one day later, he headed to Texas for a fundraiser that included several Republican donors.

"I didn't think that was a big deal at all," Turner said, reflecting on the week from a conference room in their hotel. "U.S. senators raise money throughout the country."

Looking ahead

Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, made headlines Friday for her fiery press conference speech in which she taunted Abbott and Republican leadership for their arrest warrants: "Bring it on," she said.

"Haven't we done enough? Haven't we paid the price enough?" Thompson said through tears, harking back to violence against Black Americans throughout history and Jim Crow laws that kept Black voters from the polls. "What is it going to take for us to be Americans in this country? I am an American, and I want to vote without somebody infringing upon my rights and the rights of my constituents."

But that same day, fatigue started to settle in.

The excitement of the secret departure from Texas was starting to wear off, and questions about next steps percolated among members: How could they maintain momentum and keep Democrats in Washington and voters back home interested and engaged in their work? How much longer would they stay in Washington? Where was the closest laundromat to the hotel?

"We're taking it a few days at a time," Turner said. "This is all a very fluid situation. I think back to a week ago right now. I couldn't have predicted how this intervening week would have unfolded, so you've got to stay pretty flexible. I think our members are comfortable being here as long as we're being productive, and I feel like we've been productive. I feel like there's more work to do."

Many members saw the coming weekend as an opportunity to hit the reset button and get their affairs in order. Some planned to attend a local "Good Trouble" candlelight vigil to mark the anniversary of the death of civil rights icon John Lewis. On Sunday, Black lawmakers planned to attend a church service across the Potomac River in Virginia.

"I'm not going to pretend this is easy on members. It's not," Turner said. "There's no manual or playbook for how to do a quorum break for an extended length of time. We're building the plane as we fly it, but so far it's gone pretty well."

But even as the group raised the profile of the fight over voting rights in Texas, the Democrats were no closer to securing passage of the federal legislation they sought. And back in Austin, Abbott said he would seek the arrest of the Democrats upon their return to the state and vowed to continue to call special sessions to take up the voting legislation until the Democrats returned.

And then, Friday evening, more bad news arrived: One of the Democrats had tested positive for the coronavirus. More would follow. The outbreak threatened to steal the spotlight from their work in D.C. and change the trajectory

of the trip.

Contributing: Savannah Behrmann and Ledyard King of USA TODAY and special contributor Maria Recio

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House OKs arrest of absent Dems after high court steps in

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Several absent Democrats criticized their colleagues for returning, including Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson, who tweeted at (James) Talarico, (Mary) Gonzalez and (Joe) Moody and said: "You all threw us under the bus today! Why?"

Denied a quorum yet again, Texas House Republicans voted Tuesday to give law enforcement the authority to track down and compel the attendance of absent Democrats.

The motion, approved 80-12, also gave House Speaker Dade Phelan the ability to issue civil arrest warrants against quorum-busting Democrats.

The action came after the Texas Supreme Court, responding to an emergency petition from Phelan and Gov. Greg Abbott, temporarily blocked an Austin state district judge's order that prohibited the arrest of Democrats participating in the ongoing quorum break.

Represented by Attorney General Ken Paxton, Abbott and Phelan argued that District Judge Brad Urrutia's order improperly stopped them from exercising authority specifically granted by the Texas Constitution.

"Compelling the attendance of its members is a prerogative given to the House by the Texas Constitution," the petition said.

The appeal asked the all-Republican Supreme Court to quickly overturn the order by Urrutia, a Democrat, noting that the Legislature's second special session is ongoing and the "House Democrats' return to Texas is imminent." Abbott and Phelan also said Urrutia's plan to hold an Aug. 20 hearing on the next step would come too late in a special session that can run no later than Sept. 5.

In response, the state's highest civil court blocked enforcement of Urrutia's order while justices weighed the legal issues. The court's brief order, which provided no reason for its action, gave House Democrats until Thursday afternoon to file a response.

The court action came as Democrats continued to deny Republicans a quorum in the House despite Monday's return of four lawmakers who participated in the walkout — Reps. James Talarico of Round Rock and Joe Moody, Mary Gonzalez and Art Fierro of the El Paso area. That pushed the Democratic attendance total to 13 out of 67 members. All 82 Republicans were present, including Rep. Travis Clardy, who was diagnosed with COVID-19 and sitting in a quarantine room just off the House floor.

After it became apparent Monday evening that a quorum of 100 members was out of reach, House Republicans voted to lock the chamber doors and require lawmakers to receive written permission to leave the chamber each day, one of the few actions available to present members when they lack the numbers to take official action.

But unlike during the first special session, lawmakers stopped short of calling on state law enforcement to compel the presence of absent members. That restraint ended Tuesday with approval of a motion allowing the arrest of those absent without permission.

Rep. Jim Murphy, head of the House Republican Caucus, said he hoped nobody would have to get arrested and brought to the Capitol.

"I think it's incredible that we would have to consider arresting people to have them perform the office they campaigned for and honor the obligation they swore to uphold," Murphy told reporters via Zoom.

In the meantime, some Democrats have begun returning to Texas, even if they continued to avoid the House chamber, leaving the safety of out-of-state locations where Texas law enforcement lacked authority.

Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, declined to share her exact location but said she was no longer in Washington.

"The Supreme Court of Texas ruling has nothing to do with where I will be today," she said Tuesday.

Several absent Democrats criticized their colleagues for returning, including Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson, who tweeted at Talarico, Gonzalez and Moody and said: "You all threw us under the bus today! Why?"

Also Tuesday, 21 voting rights, abortion rights and progressive groups issued a plea for House Democrats to continue their quorum break.

"In the face of an assault on voting rights unlike anything we've seen since Jim Crow, on transgender kids looking to participate in youth sports programs, on access to safe medication and abortion care, on teachers looking to teach an uncensored version of history, and so much more, Texas lawmakers cannot give in to Gov. Abbott's attempts at tyranny," the groups said in a joint statement.

"The only way to preserve our right to vote and the best way to fight is to stay off the House floor," the groups concluded.

In an order issued after 8 p.m. Sunday, Urrutia had prohibited Phelan from "detaining, confining or otherwise restricting" representatives who declined to participate in the second special session, saying the power of arrest was based on an erroneous interpretation of state law and legislative rules.

Abbott and Phelan disagreed, arguing that the judge exceeded his authority because the Texas Constitution is clear: "Legislators who fail to show up to work to fulfill their constitutional duties may be arrested, brought to the Capitol, and compelled to carry out their constitutionally assigned duty to participate in the legislative process," their petition said.

The appeal also argued that Phelan, as speaker, is immune from lawsuits related to acts taken as a member of the Legislature, and that District Court judges have no authority to determine a political question that belongs to the legislative, not the judicial, branch.

"Centuries of historical practice establish that courts have no business passing on a legislature's actions in ensuring a quorum," the appeal argued.

Find more inside

Supreme Court declines to overturn Abbott veto of Legislature's budget. 6A

Several absent Democrats criticized their colleagues for returning, including Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson, who tweeted at (James) Talarico, (Mary) Gonzalez and (Joe) Moody and said: "You all threw us under the bus today! Why?"

Phelan delivers warrants to corral absent Democrats

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Democrats on Wednesday continued to deny Republicans a quorum in the Texas House, as Speaker Dade Phelan delivered 52 civil arrest warrants to state law enforcement to corral the absent members.

A group of nearly 60 Democrats left the state a month ago in an attempt to block passage of a GOP-backed voting bill during the first special session of the year and most have yet to return to the Capitol.

Four days into the second special session, House Republicans on Tuesday voted to direct state law enforcement to bring absent members to the floor, the second time such a vote has been taken during the quorum bust. The use of civil arrest warrants is not mandatory under the vote, but an option that Phelan, a Republican from Beaumont, has decided to use.

The House met briefly Wednesday for those lawmakers present to collect their permission slips to leave the chamber for the day. The House will return to session at 4 p.m. Thursday.

Filibuster planned

The Texas Senate, meantime, began debate Wednesday afternoon on Senate Bill 1, the GOP-backed voting and elections bill that is similar to legislation that inspired the Democratic walkout in the House. Republicans argue that the bill will improve election integrity, while Democrats say the measure will disenfranchise voters.

But while senators were debating proposed amendments, Sen. Carol Alvarado, D-Houston, announced her intention to filibuster the legislation, delaying a final vote on the bill by speaking over an extended period in an attempt to call further attention to provisions Democrats oppose.

Alvarado's filibuster was expected to begin later Wednesday, the fifth day of a special session that can last 30 days.

During a filibuster, Alvarado is limited to speaking on issues relevant to SB 1 without sitting or leaning on her desk, leaving the floor for a bathroom break, eating or drinking.

Senate action

While the House has been unable to take official action, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has the Senate on a fast-paced schedule, including committee hearings and floor debates on major items from Gov. Greg Abbott's special session agenda.

Debate on the voting bill Wednesday came after senators took an initial vote on a bill designed to make future quorum breaks all but impossible — Senate Joint Resolution 1, which would lower the quorum requirement for the House and Senate from two-thirds of members to a simple majority.

Because the change would require a voter-approved amendment to the Texas Constitution, SJR 1 must have support from 21 senators. An initial vote Wednesday, however, had only 19 senators voting in favor, with two senators absent — both Democrats.

Senators also voted largely along party lines to approve SB 2, limiting the participation of transgender athletes in school sports; SB 3, limiting the way race can be discussed in Texas classrooms; SB 4, limiting the use of abortion-

inducing drugs; SB 5, responding to complaints that social media platforms censor conservatives; and SB 14, barring city and county rules requiring businesses to offer paid leave, breaks and predictive scheduling for employees.

As in the first special session, approved legislation cannot be accepted by the House until a quorum is established.

Arrest warrants

As pressure mounted on the absent Democrats to return to the House, some advocacy groups issued urgent pleas for members to continue their quorum break.

"We are supporting all those who believe the right to vote, and our freedoms should not be rigged by Republicans elites and their 1% lobbyists," said Domingo Garcia, national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

"LULAC will challenge in the federal courts any infringements of Texans' right to vote," Garcia said.

A group of more than a dozen Texas lawmakers remained in Washington, even as some of their colleagues have returned to the state or traveled to other locations outside of the state. Democrats were able to avoid the reach of state law enforcement during the first special session by crossing state lines.

"The speaker issued this warrant for my arrest last night," Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin, said in a tweet. Rodriguez is among those members still in Washington. "Arresting me is the only way they will get me back in that House."

Some Democrats have returned to the floor during the second special session, including Reps. James Talarico of Round Rock, Bobby Guerra of Mission, Eddie Lucio III of Brownsville, and Joe Moody, Mary Gonzalez and Art Fierro of the El Paso area.

Phelan did not sign arrest warrants for those members or for other Democrats who have been back in the chamber or never participated in the quorum break, including Reps. Terry Canales of Edinburg, Harold Dutton of Houston, Ryan Guillen of Rio Grande City, Tracy King of Batesville, Oscar Longoria of Mission, Eddie Morales Jr. of Eagle Pass and John Turner of Dallas.

He also did not sign a warrant for Rep. Garnet Coleman of Houston, who stayed in Texas to recover from a major surgery in May.

At least one representative will temporarily avoid apprehension. Rep. Gene Wu, D-Houston, successfully filed a writ of habeas corpus to challenge the civil arrest warrant in Harris County district court.

Lawyers plan to seek similar court-ordered protections for more than 40 other Democrats, an attorney involved in the effort said Wednesday.

"I am pleased to say the court has granted relief, at least temporarily, to prevent anyone from detaining me and dragging me back to the House Floor against my will," Wu said in a statement. "My legal counsel and I are working on granting the same protection for my fellow Texas House Democrats breaking quorum. We will continue to fight with everything we have to stop Texas Republicans' efforts to undermine your freedom to vote."

More inside

Cruz blocks voting rights blitz during all-nighter in US Senate. 9A

texas legislature - Court OKs arrest of absent Dems - Justices: House lawmakers can be forced to return

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In a victory for Republican leaders in the state Capitol, the Texas Supreme Court ruled Tuesday evening that quorum-busting Democrats can be forced to return to the House chamber, using the power of arrest if necessary.

Nineteen House Democrats had sued House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, and Gov. Greg Abbott, arguing that the Texas Constitution specifically avoided using the word arrest, making it "clear that members should not be physically forced to participate in a charade of democracy."

Instead, Democrats argued, political leaders were empowered only to use persuasion and dialogue to end a walkout that brought to a standstill the first 30-day special session as well as the first 12 days of the second legislative overtime.

The all-Republican Supreme Court disagreed, saying the Texas Constitution clearly states that lawmakers can "compel the attendance of absent members," and that they can do so "in such manner and under such penalties as (the) House may provide."

"The uniform understanding of the provision throughout our state's history — including around the time of its enactment — has been that it confers on the Legislature the power to physically compel the attendance of absent members to achieve a quorum," Justice Jimmy Blacklock wrote for the court.

A 'careful balance'

Article III of the Texas Constitution, which deals with the legislative branch, requires at least two-thirds of the members of the House and Senate to be present for business to be conducted. The same section says that if a quorum is not present, those remaining can compel those who are absent to attend.

The result is a "careful balance" between the right of a legislative minority to oppose legislation and the majority's right to conduct business, Blacklock wrote.

"(It) is one of the foundational constitutional rules governing the law-making process in Texas," he added. "Neither the passage of time nor the passions of a hotly contested legislative dispute can change what it means."

Lawyers for the Democrats said they were disappointed but not surprised at the ruling.

"It is clear that politicians ordering arrests of opposing politicians is a matter of great concern, and we intend to continue our representation so that courts might hear evidence and argument for decisions on this important issue," lawyers Sam Bassett, Jeremy Monthy and Megan Rue said in an emailed statement.

Meanwhile, spurred by Abbott, Republican lawmakers have introduced bills to place a constitutional amendment before voters that would lower the quorum threshold to a simple majority of House and Senate members.

In an initial vote last week, the proposed amendment received support from 19 senators, short of the 21 votes needed for passage, with two Democrats absent.

Trial judge blocked arrests

The 19 Democrats — including Reps. Gina Hinojosa, Vikki Goodwin, Celia Israel and Eddie Rodriguez of Austin — sued Phelan and Abbott on Aug. 8, the second day of the second special session.

Later that Sunday, state District Judge Brad Urrutia of Austin issued a temporary restraining order to halt any attempt to arrest the quorum-busters, saying the idea that their attendance could be compelled was based on an erroneous interpretation of Texas law and legislative rules.

Phelan and Abbott appealed, and on Aug. 10 the Supreme Court blocked enforcement of Urrutia's order while it weighed the legality of compelled attendance in the Texas House.

That same day, Phelan signed 52 civil arrest warrants for law enforcement to locate absent Democrats and bring them to the House chamber so a quorum could be established. To date, no arrests have been made.

Rep. Jim Murphy, chairman of the House Republican Caucus, said Monday that Phelan had yet to direct law enforcement to take absent members into custody.

"At this point, it is more like a jury summons, a paper that is delivered," said Murphy of Houston. "There will be another conversation down the line. They're still out there talking to people, visiting homes and businesses. Hopefully, we get enough of them to come back. We don't need all of them to come back, just more."

With 150 House members, 100 lawmakers must be present to establish a quorum. When the second special session convened, 96 lawmakers were on the floor, including several Democrats who participated in the initial quorum bust.

House Democrats broke quorum to halt passage of a GOP voting and elections bill that they believe would impose unnecessary barriers to casting a ballot. Republicans say the changes are needed to protect against voter fraud and bolster confidence in election results.

Tuesday's ruling, which ordered Urrutia to dissolve his restraining order, also criticized the Democratic judge for issuing the order without hearing from lawyers for the state.

The Supreme Court found Urrutia's reason — that government lawyers could not be expected to respond over the weekend — to be unpersuasive.

"As the district court should have been aware, this is simply not true. Like many other lawyers, the State's lawyers frequently work nights and weekends to meet short deadlines and respond to emergency filings," Blacklock wrote.

Includes material from staff writer Madlin Mekelburg.

Little appetite for mask mandate ban - Governor's wish for legislation has gone unheeded

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Author: María Méndez; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 1002 Words

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Public health leaders in Williamson County have recommended universal or more stringent mask requirements in school districts such as Leander, which enacted a mask policy with an opt-out provision and has seen more than 500 COVID-19 cases. Officials there temporarily closed several classrooms last week amid clusters of infections. Other district administrators in the area have shuttered classrooms, including in the Hays district, where there is no mask mandate.

Gov. Greg Abbott twice has issued orders barring school districts from mandating masks, and in early September, as the school year was about to start, he urged the Legislature to pass a bill enshrining his orders into law.

But more than 50 school districts have defied his orders — among the latest is the Marble Falls district, a conservative area where local leaders typically are aligned with the governor — amid a rise in coronavirus infections and hospitalizations, including among children. Abbott also has suffered defeats in the courts, as judges have ruled that he overstepped his authority under the Texas Disaster Act. The cases ultimately will be decided by the Texas Supreme Court.

Now, Abbott is finding little appetite at the Legislature for a bill barring mask mandates. No senator has filed legislation related to mask mandates, and, in the House, just five Republicans signed on as co-sponsors to a bill filed by Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, to prevent public schools from requiring students to wear face masks.

On Monday night, Leach retreated, offering to change House Bill 141 to allow mask mandates in schools, but with an opt-out provision for parents.

Messages left with Abbott's office were not returned Tuesday.

But influential conservative activist Michael Quinn Sullivan protested on Twitter: "With #GOP majorities in both chambers of the #TxLege, and a governor who asked for legislation stopping school districts from issuing mask mandates, this should be easy... except for Republicans like @leachfortexas who seek to compromise with Democrats at every turn."

Leach reached a deal with Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, chairman of the House Public Education Committee, to "leave it up to the individual school districts, with the only caveat being that it ought to have a parent opt out provision in there," Dutton said.

Dutton had filed HB 164 that would leave a decision on requiring masks up to a district's school board or governing body.

Leach said he wanted to protect parents' choice to not have their kids wear a mask for medical, religious or philosophical reasons, similar to exemptions allowed for vaccine requirements in schools.

"If a child walks into a school without a mask, I don't believe it should be the policy of any school district to prevent that child from entering the doors of their public school, especially if they have their parents' permission to opt out of that requirement," Leach told fellow lawmakers.

Some Democrats and members of the public raised concerns about an opt-out provision.

"I understand parental choice, but that parental choice is not limited to their child," said Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, pointing out that children under 12 are still ineligible for a COVID-19 vaccination. He also noted the coronavirus delta variant has led to more severe COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations among children.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, suggested adding a "trigger provision" or language that would grant school boards more flexibility if another pandemic arose in the future.

"I'm just worried how do we make sure we're not tying the hands of local officials when something, God forbid, worse comes down the pike," he said.

Public health leaders in Williamson County have recommended universal or more stringent mask requirements in school districts such as Leander, which enacted a mask policy with an opt-out provision and has seen more than 500 COVID-19 cases. Officials there temporarily closed several classrooms last week amid clusters of infections. Other district administrators in the area have shuttered classrooms, including in the Hays district, where there is no mask mandate.

Advocacy groups such as Texans Care for Children say mask requirements are necessary to avoid classroom closures and oppose "any steps by the Legislature or the Governor to restrict school districts' ability to implement universal masking."

"After everything that kids have been through over the last year and a half, it's devastating to think that Texas schools are going to have to keep closing because they don't have mask mandates to stop these outbreaks," said Stephanie Rubin, CEO of Texans Care for Children.

Some who testified at the hearing opposed HB 164 and any legislation allowing school boards to mandate masks even with a parental opt-out, but Rep. Dan Huberty, R-Houston, said it was best to leave such decisions to communities through their locally elected school boards.

Leach added that the proposed compromise would clarify differing mask policies that have cropped up in the state and would codify parents' rights into law.

As filed, Dutton's bill did not include a mask opt-out, but he signaled the final legislation would include it, at least for medical conditions.

Both bills were left pending Monday night.

Public health leaders in Williamson County have recommended universal or more stringent mask requirements in school districts such as Leander, which enacted a mask policy with an opt-out provision and has seen more than 500 COVID-19 cases. Officials there temporarily closed several classrooms last week amid clusters of infections. Other district administrators in the area have shuttered classrooms, including in the Hays district, where there is no mask mandate.

Advocacy groups such as Texans Care for Children say mask requirements are necessary to avoid classroom closures and oppose "any steps by the Legislature or the Governor to restrict school districts' ability to implement universal masking."

Redistricting battle begins Monday - State lawmakers set for special session

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Democrats and Republicans will return to the Capitol on Monday for a third special session that could reshape the partisan makeup of the Legislature and U.S. House of Representatives for a decade.

Drawing new boundaries for Texas' congressional districts and state House and Senate districts is the main agenda item for the session.

For Republicans, who control all aspects of the process, it is a chance to consolidate power within the state and push the U.S. House of Representative toward a Republican majority.

For Democrats, it will be a fight to maintain as much power as possible and maybe even eke out a small victory here and there.

State Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, D-Austin, said what she expects to see in the Senate is something "swift and blunt," with that chamber possibly approving draft maps by the week's end.

"It is highly probable that the maps are cooked," Eckhardt said. "They will be presented, they will be voted out by a party majority, and they will be pushed through with as little comment on the floor as they can possibly manage."

Every 10 years, states use new census data to redraw the lines for congressional and legislative voting districts. Texas' lines are decided by the Legislature, where voters have installed a Republican majority.

Because of continued population growth, Texas is gaining three seats in the U.S. Congress, bringing it 38 seats in the House of Representatives. Some projections have shown that those two new seats are likely to be centered in Houston and Dallas with one going to a Republican and the other to a Democrat.

But Democrats on Friday suggested that their Republican colleagues, emboldened by their control of all chambers of state government and in no mood to compromise, would attempt to draw districts that would be politically advantageous to them. Acrimony between the two parties has soared in the aftermath of House Democrats breaking quorum twice in a failed attempt to derail stricter voting laws and the Supreme Court allowing new abortion restrictions to stand.

Analysts in Washington have identified Texas as one of four states on which Republicans are focusing to redraw district lines that could help secure a majority in the U.S. House. The other states are Florida, Georgia and North Carolina.

"It is anticipated that those four states, Texas included, have plans to do extreme gerrymandering that will silence a majority of voters and allow Republicans to hang on to power by brute force," said state Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin.

Another example of how these political battles over congressional seats is playing out across the U.S. can be seen in New York, where the Democrat-led legislature is laying groundwork to attempt to gain five seats for Democrats.

Republican Rep. Todd Hunter and Sen. Joan Huffman are leading the map drawing processes in each Texas chamber. Neither returned messages seeking comment.

Austin-area state Reps. Erin Zwiener, James Talarico and Vikki Goodwin could be forced into more competitive districts.

Each narrowly won in 2020 and represents a district that saw rapid growth over the past 10 years that will allow Republicans to make major changes to its geographical makeup.

In the Texas Senate, Fort Worth Democrat Beverly Powell and San Antonio Democrat Roland Gutierrez could be targeted. They won their seats by less than 3.5 percentage points in their last election.

Gutierrez and Eckhardt have sued to try to bring redistricting to a halt, arguing that the Texas Constitution allows redistricting to be taken up only during a regular session of the Legislature. Lawmakers were unable to address redrawing district lines during the session because of delays in the release of the 2020 census numbers related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

They are calling for a federal court to step in and draw the maps instead of the Legislature, a gambit that, if successful, could lead to a map far less disadvantageous for Democrats.

"We're fighting," Gutierrez said Friday. "We're going to continue our work, and we hope that the courts will give us the relief that we need."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has asked for the suit to be dismissed or at least suspended until redistricting is complete. Paxton's office argued that the suit's interpretation of Texas law is wrong and that it is "inconsistent with past practice and judicial precedent."

Republicans face fewer roadblocks to creating gerrymandered districts in this round of redistricting. A ruling from the Supreme Court removed portions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that gave the U.S. Department of Justice final approval on maps drawn in some states with a history of racist voting laws.

But even with fewer constraints, there could be tension among Texas House Republicans over changes to their districts. The House is likely to see a more painstaking process as leadership wrestles with the push and pull of creating a map that favors Republicans, appeases incumbents and does not run afoul of the Voting Rights Act.

With 150 members, that is a more complicated endeavor. While Republicans have maintained their control of both chambers and all statewide offices, federal elections have shown increased Democratic turnout, especially in Texas suburbs that were once considered safe areas for Republicans.

"That is where the cracking is going to occur," Eckhardt said, referring to drawing district lines that dilute liberal voting blocs.

Redistricting is not the only item state lawmakers will take up during the special session. Gov. Greg Abbott called on the Legislature to allocate \$16 billion in COVID-19 relief funding and to pass laws limiting the participation of transgender student-athletes in school sports and prohibiting vaccine mandates. He also wants lawmakers to pass a measure on dog restraints after he vetoed one earlier this year.

On Friday, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick outlined his goals for the session, making property tax relief his No. 1 priority. Patrick also called for lawmakers to pass legislation steering state money into the unemployment insurance fund.

Proposed map for districts released - Texas GOP may increase its power in chamber

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The Republican legislator leading the effort to redraw district boundaries for the Texas House released a proposed map Thursday that could bolster Republicans' hold on power in that chamber.

Presidential election returns show that in just over half of the current House districts — 76 out of 150 — a majority of voters favored former President Donald Trump in 2020. Under the plan filed by Rep. Todd Hunter, R-Corpus Christi, that number would jump to 86, according to an analysis from the nonpartisan redistricting site PlanScore.

There are currently 83 Republicans and 67 Democrats in the chamber.

The number of competitive districts — districts decided by fewer than 10 points — also would shrink from 29 to 18. In some cases, Democratic-held districts already considered safe were made even safer, while swing districts were redrawn with strong Republican majorities.

Democrats respond

Texas House Democratic Caucus Chair Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, issued a statement condemning the proposal for not adequately accommodating growing minority communities.

"Texans of color have driven over 95% of the growth in Texas over the last decade," Turner said. "Maps for the House, Senate and Congress should reflect that. We're still analyzing the initial House plan, but it does not appear that this map fairly reflects our state's population growth."

There are currently seven House districts with a majority Black voting-age population. That drops to four districts under Hunter's plan. And the number of House districts with a majority of Hispanic voters drops from 33 to 30.

Inadequate minority representation could be used in legal challenges to the proposed map under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, for the first time in decades, Texas will not be required to clear the maps with the Justice Department.

Two battleground House districts in Central Texas that flipped from red to blue in 2018 — District 47 in western Travis County and District 45 in Hays and Blanco counties — were redrawn to favor Democratic candidates. The western portions of Travis and Hays counties were redrawn into districts with a majority of Republican voters.

However, Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, who represents District 45, was drawn out of her district. She lives within the proposed boundaries of District 73, which is drawn to elect a Republican.

"We'll see what happens, but I am very grateful that San Marcos in particular was kept whole," Zwiener told the American-Statesman.

District 52, which encompasses Round Rock, Taylor and southern Georgetown, was redrawn to include rural areas, endangering the reelection chances of Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock.

Williamson County will have three districts wholly contained within the county for the first time, reflecting the county's rapid growth.

The other six Austin-area districts currently represented by Democrats appear to remain safe Democratic seats under the new map.

But Rep. Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin, said she was not happy with the changes to her district.

Her district appears more or less to have swapped with Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin. Both remain in District 47 and District 48 respectively, but Howard would now represent portions of West Austin and Bee Cave, while Goodwin would represent West Lake Hills and some southern reaches of Austin and Travis County.

"That's not ideal because we've gotten to know constituents in our districts, and so it would mean learning a whole new set of issues for a whole new set of constituents," Goodwin said. "For the voters and constituents, they have to get a whole new representative up to speed on their issues."

"We're going to try to fix that," she added.

Two Republicans were drawn into the district that would represent western Travis County communities such as Lakeway and Lago Vista. If that stands, it could lead to a bruising primary between Fredericksburg Rep. Kyle Biedermann and Granite Shoals Rep. Terry Wilson.

Population shifts

Lawmakers redraw district lines for both legislative chambers and Texas' seats in the U.S. House every decade with new census data. Republicans are in control of all levels of the process.

It involves rebalancing districts so the population is nearly the same in each district.

The ideal population for a House district was set at about 194,000 for this round of redistricting.

For many urban and suburban districts, that meant the size of districts contracted as population growth in Texas has been centered around major metropolitan areas. Conversely, rural districts in parts of East and West Texas grew in size.

In the Legislature's upper chamber, state Sen. Joan Huffman, R-Houston, has filed a new district map for the Texas Senate, Texas' 38 U.S. House seats and the State Board of Education. In all cases, Republicans have drawn district lines that would strengthen their power over Democrats.

Democrats have cried foul over those plans, and some advocacy groups have threatened legal action if the proposed maps are passed in their current form.

The Special Senate Redistricting Committee voted to advance the state Senate and Board of Education plans to the Senate floor on Tuesday.

House members have until 9 a.m. Monday to file amendments to the Texas House map.

Inside

US House district map draws fire at hearing, 4A

A closer look at dizzying exercise of redistricting in Texas

October 3, 2021 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: News | 748 Words

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A whole lot of Texans are about to realize they've moved, even though they haven't gone anywhere.

That's all because of the magic of redistricting, which is in full swing at the Capitol. It's a slicing-and-dicing exercise required under law to reflect what turned out to be some pretty dramatic demographic shifts in the state over the past 10 years that were unearthed in the 2020 census.

Arguments can be — and are being — made that the demographic shifts are being ignored rather than reflected by the map drawers in the Legislature. The most dramatic illustration of that is that although people of color powered Texas' population gain of 4 million people since 2010, the redistricting maps for the state Senate, House and congressional delegations being drawn up in the Republican-dominated Legislature are by and large more Anglo-dominated than the current ones.

And that means countless Texans represented by Democrats are probably going to have Republicans speaking for them in Austin and Washington because the GOP controls politics in this state and has artfully figured out a way to diminish even further the clout of the opposition party.

None of the maps has final approval, meaning we're likely to see some tinkering and some horse-trading over the next several days and perhaps weeks. Or maybe we won't see a fair amount of it because wheeling and dealing too often takes place behind closed doors in private phone calls and text messages in your Texas Legislature.

But accomplishing what's on the table now took a whole lot of shuffling and deck-cutting.

For example, about half of the residents of Nueces County would be moved into a new state Senate district under the map awaiting approval. Half of the county would stay in District 20. The other half would find itself in District 27.

And it appears that about 20% of the people in El Paso are living in a state House district that is moving to the Houston area. At least the district number is. That's because the El Paso delegation would shrink from five House members to four since the region isn't as growing as fast as Texas' other urban areas.

The Senate map would expand Democrat Cesar Blanco's turf, which is currently made up of El Paso County and the five nearest counties to its east and south. He'd pick up the next four counties east and south to boost the population of District 29 to the required level.

A bunch of people in rural Texas, where population growth also has been stagnant, are going to find themselves in new state Senate, House and congressional districts because the current ones have too few people. Those rural areas that have been represented by Republicans would still be represented by Republicans. But in many cases, they'd be different Republicans from the ones many residents have grown used to.

The redistricting process also includes a practice known as "pairing." That's when two incumbents of different districts are drawn into a single new district where only one of them will win. In El Paso, freshman state Rep. Claudia Ordaz Perez is paired with fellow Democrat Lina Ortega, who's in her third term. They've generally been allies on most issues this year. Whether that alliance holds depends on whether both enter next year's primary.

The process also includes drawing some incumbents out. That's when the new district puts the incumbent in

territory dominated by the opposing party. In the Austin suburbs, sophomore Democratic state Rep. James Talarico, the House's youngest member, who at 32 is seen as something of a comer in political circles, will have his work cut out for him in a district that's more Republican than his current one.

The upside of redistricting is that some comfortable incumbents will have to redouble their efforts to connect with the people they wish to represent. The downside is that some Texans are going to be represented by people who haven't a clue about what they need, or what they don't want, from government.

The byproduct is that a fair amount of lawyers are going to get richer. That's because candidates who can't win in the Legislature when it comes to redistricting will turn to the courts to argue that the maps are unconstitutionally discriminatory.

That has happened every 10 years for as long as anyone can remember, and it will happen again.

John C. Moritz

Columnist

USA TODAY NETWORK

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2022 REDISTRICTING - Panel OKs map for state House - Plan would bolster Republican majority

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A new district map that would strengthen the GOP majority in the Texas House passed its first legislative hurdle Tuesday when the House Redistricting Committee voted 8-6 along party lines to approve the plan.

During a 16-hour hearing that ended early Tuesday, the committee adjusted boundaries for several Austin-area districts to ensure that current officeholders will not be drawn out of the districts they represent.

Rep. Todd Hunter, R-Corpus Christi, chairman of the redistricting panel and author of the plan, told the committee Monday that the map was the result of feedback from House members, regional stakeholders and a law firm hired to advise lawmakers through the process.

The hearing included about 10 hours of public testimony, followed by one hour of feedback from several House lawmakers, who highlighted concerns about proposed maps in their communities. The committee finished its work at 1:30 a.m. and then reconvened Tuesday afternoon for a vote on final approval.

Hunter faced criticism from lawmakers and members of the public over the pace of Monday's proceedings, which some argued did not afford enough time for a complete review of feedback submitted during the hearing or a comprehensive discussion of proposed amendments before the entire proposal was put to a vote.

Several Democratic lawmakers also have questioned the role their party played in drafting the new political boundaries.

Rep. Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin, told the American-Statesman that the delegation from Travis County was asked to draft its own district maps and submit the proposals to committee leaders. But the draft before the committee Monday did not reflect their suggestions.

Hunter said he spoke privately with Democrats and Republicans while drafting the map, but he would not identify specific lawmakers.

"When members meet with me, I keep it confidential," he said.

The Legislature must redraw the boundaries of political districts every decade, after release of the decennial census. The release of this year's census data was delayed by the pandemic, prompting lawmakers to undertake the redistricting process during a special legislative session, instead of earlier this year during the regular session.

Hunter's proposed map of the 150 House districts would bolster Republicans' hold on power in the chamber by increasing the number of districts that favored Donald Trump during the 2020 election and by decreasing the number of competitive districts in the state, according to an analysis from the nonpartisan redistricting site PlanScore.

There are currently 83 Republicans and 67 Democrats in the chamber. Under Hunter's original proposal, the number of Republican-leaning districts would jump to 86. The number of competitive districts, where the general election was decided by fewer than 10 points, would fall from 29 to 18.

But in one change to the bill Monday, House District 70 in Collin County will go from being a Republican district to a

Democratic-leaning district, bringing the total number of Republican-leaning districts to 85 in the proposal approved by the committee.

Democrats have criticized the map, saying it does not reflect the growing population of nonwhite communities in the state. The number of House districts with a majority Black voting-age population would drop from seven to four under Hunter's plan, and the number of districts with a majority of Hispanic voters would fall from 33 to 30.

White voters tend to favor Republicans and nonwhite voters tend to favor Democrats.

The original map drew three Austin-area lawmakers out of the districts they represent: Goodwin and Reps. Donna Howard, D-Austin, and Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood.

The original proposal essentially swapped Goodwin's and Howard's districts. While Goodwin remained in District 47 and Howard in District 48, Howard would have represented portions of West Austin and Bee Cave, and Goodwin would have represented West Lake Hills and some southern reaches of Austin and Travis County.

An amendment adopted by the committee swapped the districts again, ensuring the lawmakers can continue to serve the same communities that elected them.

The original draft also drew Zwiener out of District 45 in Hays County, moving her residence to District 73, which was drawn with a Republican majority. An amendment to move the precinct including Zwiener's residence back to her district was withdrawn during the debate, but author Joe Moody, D-El Paso, said he planned to propose the same amendment when the bill comes before the full House for consideration.

The committee voted down an attempt to tweak the proposed boundaries for District 52, which covers Round Rock, Taylor and southern Georgetown. The district was redrawn to include rural communities to the north, endangering the reelection chances of Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, and an amendment to remove those rural areas from the district failed.

Early in the hearing, Hunter fielded questions from Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, about how the proposal was drafted and what input was given by Adam Foltz, a Republican redistricting operative known for his work on Wisconsin's 2010 redistricting process, which drew condemnation from federal judges for its secretive nature.

Hunter said he made the decision to hire Foltz based on his résumé, which reflected data experience that Hunter thought would serve the Legislature well through its redistricting work. Foltz's role in the process was first reported by the Texas Tribune.

"I do not know what happened in Wisconsin and did not even inquire," Hunter said. "I looked at him and hired him on what I saw he could do."

Find more inside

Texas Senate gives final OK to Senate redistricting map. 7A

Texas House approves new map - District lines help protect Republican majority in chamber

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Author: Madlin Mekelburg; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 1248 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas House early Wednesday approved a map for new political districts that would solidify Republican control of the chamber, protect incumbent lawmakers from both parties and reduce the number of competitive districts across the state.

Democrats criticized the map for failing to reflect the rapid growth of the Hispanic and Asian population over the past decade. They contended that the proposed maps would reduce the number of districts where nonwhite people comprise the majority of eligible voters.

But Republican Rep. Todd Hunter of Corpus Christi, author of the new House map, pushed back against the criticism. He has maintained that his plan creates two new districts where Hispanic residents make up the majority of the population and one new district with Black residents in the majority.

The issue was at the center of the 16-hour debate over the proposal in the House on Tuesday which stretched into Wednesday, culminating in an 83-63 vote along party lines to adopt the map.

"We believe we've complied with the law and met the obligations to our citizens and constituents," Hunter said when he presented the bill. "I appreciate everybody trying. I know that in any redistricting, some have issues and some don't — that's the nature of redistricting."

Amendments focused on race

The Legislature must redraw the boundaries of political districts every decade, after the release of the decennial census. This year's census data was delayed by the pandemic, prompting lawmakers to undertake the redistricting process during a special legislative session, instead of during the regular session earlier this year.

During Tuesday's debate, Democrats proposed numerous amendments to address concerns that the map dilutes the voting power of Texans of color, who accounted for 95% of the state's population growth over the past decade, according to the 2020 U.S. census.

The state's population jumped from 25.1 million in 2010 to roughly 29.1 million. The new ideal population size for House districts is 194,303, up from 167,367 in 2010 during the last redistricting process.

"When communities of color account for 95% of all the growth and you actually reduce the numbers of communities of color that can elect people of their choice in districts and then increase the number of Anglo districts — I think that is a substantive failure," said Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, while presenting an amendment that would have killed the entire bill.

Anchia also proposed an amendment that would have redrawn the map to create more districts with Hispanic-majority populations. Rep. Nicole Collier, D-Fort Worth, also proposed a new map that would have added additional Black-majority districts. Neither were adopted.

Rep. Gene Wu, D-Houston, offered an amendment early in the debate that would have required the Texas secretary of state to conduct a racial impact study of the proposed districts, using population estimates that account for citizenship as the basis of the analysis. The amendment was not adopted.

Small changes adopted

Lawmakers did approve numerous changes to the proposed map, including small tweaks to districts across the state.

The largest changes occurred in Harris and Dallas counties.

One successful amendment from Anchia would create two more districts in North Texas with a majority Black population and one more district with a majority Hispanic population.

In Austin, Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin, made some small tweaks to the districts near downtown, slightly adjusting the borders of the district he represents and those adjoining areas. The amendment was adopted.

The House also approved an amendment from Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, that would redraw her residence back into the district she represents. Hunter's original draft of the map would have moved Zwiener from House District 45 into the neighboring House District 73, a more Republican area.

Zwiener's amendment also keeps Wimberley in the same district, instead of dividing it between HD 45 and HD 73.

The debate was mostly cordial, but one amendment sparked intense exchanges between lawmakers. Rep. J.M. Lozano, R-Kingsville, proposed a change to districts in the Rio Grande Valley that would make House District 37 more competitive for his party.

Rep. Alex Dominguez, the Democrat who represents HD 37, spoke in opposition to the proposal and said Lozano did not run the change by members of the Rio Grande Valley delegation before offering the amendment.

Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville, also spoke against the proposed change, telling members in the chamber that his remarks likely would be the last time he ever addressed the House during a debate. Lucio is not running for reelection in 2022.

"Please, let our delegation speak its mind and vote no on this amendment," he said.

The amendment was adopted 72-70.

Talarico to relocate

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, was not drawn out of the district he represents in the final version of the bill, but said the new boundaries approved by members changed House District 52 from a competitive district into a Republican stronghold.

The new lines expand the district to include rural areas north of Georgetown.

Talarico said Wednesday that he plans to move to Austin and run for House District 50. That district is represented by Rep. Celia Israel, D-Austin, who is considering running for mayor of Austin and is not seeking reelection.

"Texas Republicans are attempting to eliminate me by using racist gerrymandering to divide our community. If they think they can keep me out of the House, they better think again," Talarico said. "I'm grateful to everyone who's urged me to move back to North Austin -- where I grew up -- to run for the seat being vacated by my friend Celia Israel."

Under the new district map, House District 50 would cover portions of North Austin

El Paso lawmakers paired

In drawing the map, Hunter said his priority was to avoid splitting precincts between districts and keeping each district as compact as possible. He said he also worked to avoid "pairing" lawmakers, or drawing more than one lawmaker into the same district.

At least one pairing remained in the final map: Democratic Reps. Lina Ortega and Claudia Ordaz Perez of El Paso were drawn into the same district covering parts of downtown El Paso. Ordaz Perez spoke against the bill and said it disenfranchised people from the district she represents.

"The proposed map not only dilutes minority representation in Texas, it erodes the gains of women representatives, who were elected in record numbers by Texas voters in the last election cycle," she said. "To any judges who would review these proceedings I ask: How many more decades of minority population growth is needed before this body will actually look like the people it represents? How lopsided must the minority population of this state be before people of color are adequately represented?"

The final version of the legislative maps is expected to be challenged in court. Unlike past redistricting efforts, lawmakers in Texas this year can adopt new political boundaries without first getting federal approval through a preclearance process, a requirement adopted for states like Texas with a history of discriminating against nonwhite voters.

Rep. Toni Rose, D-Dallas, offered an amendment that would have required a federal district court to first approve the state's new political boundaries before they could be enacted, but it did not pass.

The final version of the map must be approved by the Senate. The House still has three other redistricting duties to tackle: approving new maps for the Texas Senate, the state's U.S. House districts and districts for the State Board of Education. The Senate approved those maps earlier this month.

The 30-day special session is scheduled to end Tuesday, but Gov. Greg Abbott could order another special session.

Bill to block trans athletes approved - Texas House OKs sports limitations

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[OpenURL Link](#)

After 10 hours of emotional, contentious debate, the Texas House voted Thursday night to block transgender athletes from competing in public school sports in their gender identity.

Democrats forcefully, and sometimes tearfully, attacked House Bill 25 as a dangerous foray into discrimination that seeks to address a nonexistent problem — sacrificing already vulnerable transgender youths to foment a culture war for political gain.

"Where is this coming from?" asked state Rep. Ann Johnson, D-Houston. "Because we put on the record that there is not one case — not one case — of a trans girl taking a competitive spot from a female student in Texas."

But the bill's author, Rep. Valoree Swanson, R-Spring, and other Republicans insisted that the goal was to protect girls sports.

"I'm excited that we have the opportunity today to stand up for our daughters, our granddaughters and all our Texas girls," Swanson said, adding that HB 25 seeks to protect competitive fairness and safety for girls.

"We fought for this right, and now we have to defend it," she said.

Approved 76-54, HB 25 arrived Friday morning at the Texas Senate, where fast approval was expected.

Senators, also sharply divided along party lines, approved a similar measure last month, and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, has made the transgender sports bill one of his top legislative priorities.

Gov. Greg Abbott also has endorsed the concept, adding the sports bill to the agenda of all three special sessions after Democrats blocked its passage in the regular session that ended in May.

HB 25 would require public school athletes to compete in sports based on the "biological sex" listed on their birth certificates.

Patrick and other Republicans insist the limitation is needed to counter a growing movement of inclusion for transgender people that threatens the fairness that is essential for school sports, potentially robbing girls of the benefits of athletics — from learning teamwork and applying leadership skills to qualifying for college scholarships.

Crisis hotline calls

A parade of Democrats disputed that claim, saying supporters could point to no Texas athletes who lost a competition or a spot on a team to a transgender student.

Worse, they said, HB 25 amounted to state-sponsored bullying against a population that is too often singled out for exclusion and already reports high levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.

"That's what we should be addressing, not some boogeyman threat to little girls that doesn't exist," said Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin.

In the first eight months of 2021, while bills targeting transgender Texans were being debated by the Legislature,

more than 3,900 transgender youths called an LGBTQ-friendly crisis hotline — up 150% from the year before, said Rep. Celia Israel, D-Austin.

"This bill is mean-spirited, inherently discriminatory and harms Texas children — our children," said Rep. John Bucy III, D-Austin.

"Being in youth sports changes lives, and this bill takes away that opportunity for trans kids in Texas."

Rep. Joe Moody, D-El Paso, said Republicans have had ample warning about the negative impact HB 25 has had, and will have, on transgender Texans.

"The bill was designed knowing these kids will be harmed, and that's a price that some are willing to pay for grown adults to score symbolic points, in a fight they chose, over a fiction. It is a sin what we are doing here today," Moody said.

'Statewide level playing field'

Swanson disagreed. "We need a statewide level playing field. It's very important that we, who got elected to be here, protect our girls," she said.

HB 25 would codify a statewide rule for public schools, adopted in 2016, that requires athletes to compete in sports based on the sex listed on their birth certificate, Swanson said.

The bill would take the policy one step further, she added, by requiring those birth certificates to have been issued "at or near their time of birth" — disallowing amended documents that might be obtained by transgender students.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said that added step was unenforceable, taking an "immoral and hateful" bill and making it illogical as well.

Although HB 25 seeks to ban the use of amended or updated birth certificates that could reflect a student's gender transition, Talarico said amended certificates bear no designation that they were changed, making them indistinguishable from those issued "at or near" the time of birth.

"But the goal is not to enforce this legislation," Talarico said.

"The goal is not to be able to assign students to a certain sports team. The goal is to ostracize kids who are already vulnerable in our community for political gain."

'Made-up issue'

During the debate, Rep. Jon Rosenthal, D-Houston, described concerns about transgender athletes as a nonissue used "to gin up hate."

That drew a challenge from Rep. Tony Tinderholt, R-Arlington.

"What about the females that are trying to play sports and compete and get scholarships, and they're forced to play against people that are created differently. Are you thinking about them at all?" Tinderholt asked. "I'm concerned about them. Are you concerned about them at all, sir?"

"The reason that we say that it's a nonissue, a made-up issue, that it's fabricated," Rosenthal replied, "is because there's no documented evidence in the state of Texas where a (transgender child) has ever taken away a scholarship or even a starting place on a team of any sport from a born female."

The Republican majority easily turned aside almost 20 Democratic amendments meant to effectively kill the bill or

at least soften its impact.

The only Democrat to successfully amend HB 25 was Rep. Donna Howard of Austin, who wanted to make sure that a student athlete's personal medical information was protected from improper disclosure.

The amendment easily passed after Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress and a physician, vouched for it with Howard at his side.

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Pet boarding facilities lack regulations - No laws or ordinances require fire prevention

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[OpenURL Link](#)

In the weeks after an overnight fire at a Georgetown kennel killed 75 dogs, a petition calling for greater regulation and oversight of pet boarding facilities has gained more than 18,000 signatures.

No Central Texas city requires such facilities specifically to be equipped with sprinkler systems and staffed at all times, according to an American-Statesman survey of city regulations. And there are no state laws requiring sprinkler systems in pet boarding facilities.

The Ponderosa Pet Resort in Georgetown did not have a sprinkler system, and no one was present at the facility when it caught fire Sept. 18.

The National Fire Protection Association's code recommends sprinkler protection in kennels that don't have 24-hour supervision. When a person is on the premises, the organization recommends only a fire alarm.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed a bill this month, during the third special legislative session, to require smoke detectors and sprinkler systems in kennels that do not have staffers present at all times, with criminal penalties for noncompliance. But the legislation did not advance, and because Gov. Greg Abbott did not ask the Legislature to address the issue — the governor sets the agenda for a special session — the bill had no chance of becoming law.

The Georgetown City Council is expected to consider updating the city's fire code this fall, requiring smoke alarms and/or sprinkler systems in kennels and pet boarding facilities regardless of square footage.

Here's how Central Texas cities regulate (or don't regulate) pet boarding buildings:

Austin

There are no requirements for sprinkler systems or 24-hour staffing for pet boarding facilities. Fire alarm systems are required in buildings that have an occupancy of more than 500 people.

The Austin Animal Center, the city-run shelter, has smoke and heat sensors and a sprinkler system. If there were a fire overnight, the sprinkler system would go off and the Austin Fire Department would be dispatched via the fire monitoring service. If there is a fire during operating hours, the facility follows an incident command model. Fire extinguishers are located throughout the building.

Cedar Park

According to a Cedar Park Fire Department spokesperson, it is not mandated that boarding facilities have staff members on site at all times, and sprinkler systems with monitored alarm systems are required only in buildings larger than 12,000 square feet, regardless of use.

After the Georgetown fire, Cedar Park will be changing its fire and code inspection schedule in pet boarding facilities, from every three years to annually.

No pet boarding facilities have been cited for violating regulations over the past five years.

Dripping Springs

There are no commercial kennels.

Kyle

The city does not require staff members to be on site at all times at boarding facilities. Fire alarm and sprinkler systems are required for buildings larger than 12,000 square feet. Typically, pet boarding facilities do not meet that threshold, said Hays County Fire Marshal Nathan Mendenhall.

The city has not found any violations or received complaints at its only pet boarding facility.

Such facilities require a permit, but fire inspections are done only during construction of new facilities and for state-licensed facilities and schools.

Lakeway

There are no commercial kennels.

Leander

Leander mandates automatic sprinkler systems for buildings that have one or more stories with an occupant load of 30 or more. The city also requires sprinkler systems for all commercial buildings that are 6,000 square feet or larger.

City officials said they try to inspect all businesses annually, but that schedule is not mandated.

Pflugerville

Pflugerville does not have specific code ordinances related to kennels, and they must follow the same building codes and regulations as other businesses in the city.

Round Rock

Pet boarding facilities in Round Rock must have sprinkler systems installed if the building area is 10,000 square feet or more. Manual fire alarm systems are required in businesses with an occupancy of 500 or more.

When the Fire Department gets a report of a fire code deficiency, officials will visit the building to ensure code compliance is maintained. According to Round Rock Fire Marshal Dennis Kincheloe, the city has not cited any pet boarding facilities.

San Marcos

There are no fire code ordinances specifically related to animal hospitals, kennels or shelters.

How GOP safe havens were made - Critics: Redrawn districts don't reflect Texas' census results

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Across the board, the new maps cement Republican dominance, but they also shrink the number of politically competitive districts and the number of so-called opportunity districts for Black and Hispanic candidates, where nonwhite voters make up the majority of estimated eligible voters.

When Angela Villescaz learned that her longtime congressman, Lloyd Doggett, planned to run in a new district in 2022, she was ecstatic.

She was so moved by the announcement that she climbed into her car and drove 40 minutes from her home in Hays County to Central Austin in mid-October to be there as the Democrat announced his campaign for the newly drawn Austin-based 37th District.

"I was one of the ones that was always on social media being so hard on him and telling him, 'Could you please move over so we can have a Hispanic district?'" Villescaz said. "I wanted to come and thank him personally."

Doggett currently represents the 35th District, one of eight U.S. House districts in Texas where a majority of estimated eligible voters are Hispanic under the state's current maps.

That number is set to fall by one under newly drawn political boundaries signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday, even as the number of congressional districts in Texas increased by two.

Legislators must redraw maps of political districts every decade, after the release of the decennial census. As they craft new lines for the U.S. House, Texas House, Texas Senate and the State Board of Education, lawmakers must ensure that districts have roughly equal populations and that the lines do not discriminate against people of color.

Republican mapmakers repeatedly said during the special legislative session that ended this month that the maps were drawn "blind to race" and that they would withstand legal scrutiny.

Across the board, the new maps cement Republican dominance, but they also shrink the number of politically competitive districts and the number of so-called opportunity districts for Black and Hispanic candidates, where nonwhite voters make up the majority of estimated eligible voters.

This is despite the fact that population growth in the state over the past decade was driven by people of color. The latest census numbers show that Hispanic and white Texans make up an equal share of the state's population at roughly 40% each.

"This is a partisan power grab that fails to accurately reflect the 2020 census," said Genevieve Van Cleve, the Texas state director of All on the Line, the organizing arm of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee.

Opportunity districts

The new maps have drawn two legal challenges, brought by groups who argued that the new districts are unconstitutional because they increase the power of white voters in the state and dilute the voting strength of Hispanics.

Republicans who led the redistricting effort said the new maps were reviewed by lawyers who determined that the districts complied with federal voting rights laws.

Under the Voting Rights Act, states cannot draw districts that deny nonwhite communities the chance to elect a candidate of their choice. This means that, although lawmakers are not allowed to use race as the primary factor when drawing new maps, they are expected to protect or create opportunity districts for voters of color to account for population changes.

The new maps for the U.S. House and Texas House reduce the number of districts where Hispanic and Black voters constitute the majority of the electorate, when considering the most recent population counts for the districts.

Among 38 U.S. House districts, seven will have a Hispanic majority (down from eight) and none will have a Black majority (down from one). The Texas House will see a similar decline, with 30 Hispanic majority districts (down from 33) and 25 Black majority districts (down from 27).

Population gains in the state led to the creation of two new congressional districts — both of which will be controlled by white voters, including the 37th District where Doggett plans to run.

Maps for the 31-district state Senate and 15-district State Board of Education maintain the same number of districts where nonwhite voters constitute the majority of voters. Seven Senate districts will maintain a Hispanic majority, and one district will continue to be majority Black. Three seats on the education board will continue to be elected in district with a Hispanic majority, and none of the board's districts have a Black majority.

This redistricting cycle marks the first time in decades lawmakers in Texas were able to adopt new political maps without first receiving federal approval through the preclearance process, a past requirement for states such as Texas with a history of discriminating against people of color.

Political competition

Across all four maps, there are more districts where voters favor Republicans, further shifting the balance of power of the state's government to the right.

To an extent, the political party in power is allowed to draw maps that help candidates with that party win future elections. In Texas, this is seen in districts where communities of Democratic voters are split across several districts or packed into a single district — both of which reduce their voting power.

Voting rights groups in the state say this strategy has created fewer competitive districts.

In Travis County and neighboring counties, the number of congressional districts remains the same. While the area gains the 37th District, drawn to favor Democratic candidates by scooping up most of Austin's liberal voters, the area loses the 25th District, represented by Austin Republican Roger Williams. The 25th District stretches from East Austin to Cleburne, just south of Fort Worth. Under the new map, the district was shifted north and covers Hood County and other areas to the west of Fort Worth. Williams, who has ties to North Texas, has said he's running for reelection.

Of the six districts that remain in the area, two gained slightly more Democratic voters, based on 2020 presidential election results:

27th District: Trump won the current district by 23.73% and would have won the new district by an estimated 22.39% — a 1.34% shift.

35th District: Biden won the current district by 37.13% and would have won the new district by an estimated 45.11% — a 7.98% shift.

The number of Republican voters in the four other districts increased by 11% or more:

10th District: Trump won the current district by 1.61% and would have won the new district by an estimated 18.81% — a 17.2% shift.

17th District: Trump won the current district by 10.98% and would have won the new district by an estimated 22.58% — a 11.6% shift.

21st District: Trump won the current district by 2.71% and would have won the new district by an estimated 19.66% — a 16.95% shift.

31st District: Trump won the current district by 2.94% and would have won the new district by an estimated 20.32% — a 17.38% shift.

In 2018 and 2020, Democratic candidates raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaigns to seize Central Texas seats that had been in Republican hands for years, but that had become more competitive because of shifting demographics and changing party preferences of suburban voters. Democratic candidates in 2018 came within a few percentage points of winning in the 10th, 21st and 31st districts.

In 2020, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the fundraising arm of U.S. House Democrats, opened an Austin office to support candidates running to unseat Central Texas Republicans. The group has announced no such plans this year.

The incumbents who once faced spirited, well-financed opponents should find an easier path to reelection in 2022 and beyond, including U.S. Reps. Michael McCaul, R-Austin (10th District), John Carter, R-Round Rock (31st District), and Chip Roy, a Republican who lives just outside Austin in Hays County (21st District).

Texas Senate, House

Three of the five Texas Senate districts in the area saw an increase in Democratic voters, with Districts 14 and 21 becoming more deeply blue and District 24 becoming slightly less red, but still solidly Republican. Districts 5 and 25 gained Republican voters, becoming more red.

Three of the Texas House districts in the area that have been competitive in years past both gained more Democratic voters under the new maps, becoming safer territory for Democratic candidates: District 45 in Hays County, represented by Democrat Erin Zwiener, District 47 in West Austin, represented by Democrat Vikki Goodwin, and District 136 in Williamson County, represented by Democrat John Bucy III.

District 45: Biden won the current district by 7.25% and would have won the new district by an estimated 19.09% — an 11.84% shift.

District 47: Biden won the current district by 10.39% and would have won the new district by an estimated 25.59% — a 15.20% shift.

District 136: Biden won the current district by 16.1% and would have won the new district by an estimated 26.69% — a 10.59% shift.

Just one of the 13 Texas House districts in Travis and neighboring counties is likely to switch party hands under the new proposal.

District 52 currently covers Round Rock, Hutto, Taylor and a small portion of Georgetown in Williamson County and is represented by Rep. James Talarico, a Democrat. Biden won the district by 10% in 2020 and white voters make up the majority of the district's population.

But under the new maps, much of Round Rock is drawn into neighboring District 135. District 52 still includes Taylor and Hutto, but will extend farther north and cover more rural portions of the county that are more conservative. Under the new lines, Trump would have won the district by about 6%.

Talarico, who has decided to run to represent House District 50 in Northeast Austin and Pflugerville in 2022, said the existing District 52 unites three communities in Williamson County with large Black and Hispanic populations: South Taylor, Central Round Rock and South Georgetown.

"Under this new map, those three Black and brown neighborhoods have each been divided into three different districts," Talarico said. "They are drawn into predominantly rural white communities, meaning their voice has been significantly weakened under this new map."

GOP targets

When Mina Davis, 29, learned about the proposed changes to House District 52, she said she started to cry.

"It just brought a lot of pain," said Davis, who works for the National Domestic Workers Alliance Labs and as a community organizer in Williamson County. "These are people that really need advocates, or at least someone to really listen and understand them."

Davis, who is Black and Asian, is an outspoken Democrat who has run for local office herself and done volunteer work on behalf of Talarico and other candidates.

With the new parameters of the district, Davis said she fears that her community could be forgotten.

Matt Mackowiak, chairman of the Travis County Republican Party, said the new District 52 is one of three state House districts in the Austin area that the GOP is prioritizing in 2022.

Three candidates have emerged so far: Caroline Harris and Nelson Jarrin, both former staffers for Republican state lawmakers, and Patrick McGuinness.

Republicans are also looking to District 73, which covers the western half of Hays County and all of Comal County to the South, and to the newly formed House District 19, which includes a piece of western Travis County and covers all of Burnet, Blanco, Kendall and Gillespie counties.

"We're excited at the local level about having Republican representation in Travis County in the House with that new district, which takes in the Hill Country," Mackowiak said, noting that the last Republican House member to represent a piece of Travis County was Paul Workman, who lost to Goodwin in 2018.

Two Republican candidates have announced candidacies so far for the seat: former Austin City Council Member Ellen Troxclair and Justin Berry, an Austin police officer.

"This is a rapidly growing area, and Central Texas is going to increasingly be a battleground," Mackowiak said.

Find more inside

By the numbers: Changes with redistricting. 10A

Redrawn Central Texas districts. 11A

Changes with redistricting

Despite Texas seeing an increase in population spurred by growth in the Hispanic and Black communities, state lawmakers have adopted a plan to add more political districts with a white majority.

Texas population

U.S. House

Under the new redistricting plan that favors Republicans, Texas would add a majority white congressional district and lose a district with a black majority.

The new political boundaries would expand Republican control of the statehouse and bolster current GOP strongholds. In the Texas House, the new maps increase the number of white majority districts and reduce the number of seats where Hispanic voters make up the majority of the electorate.

Texas House

Texas Senate

Texas Board of Education

Notes: Figures for Texas population may not equal 100% because some people identify as two or more races; two congressional seats were added in the new maps, bringing the total number of districts from 36 to 38

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Texas Legislative Council

USA TODAY NETWORK

Redrawn Central Texas districts

Travis County will continue to be splintered in the new set of congressional district lines, with a new Democratic-leaning district carved out of Austin.

District 10

Extends east toward suburbs west of Houston, leans Republican

District 17

Extends into East Texas, leans Republican

District 21

Extends into Hill Country, leans Republican

District 27

Extends to Gulf Coast, leans Republican

District 31

Extends north, including Fort Hood, leans Republican

District 35

Extends into Bexar County along I-35, leans Democratic

District 37

Largely in Travis County, leans Democratic

Source: Legislative Redistricting Board

USA TODAY NETWORK

Across the board, the new maps cement Republican dominance, but they also shrink the number of politically competitive districts and the number of so-called opportunity districts for Black and Hispanic candidates, where nonwhite voters make up the majority of estimated eligible voters.

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Owners of pets file suit over fire - Filing claims electrical problems were known

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Some owners of the 75 dogs who died in the September fire at a pet kennel in Georgetown have sued the business, saying the owner knew the facility had electrical problems before the tragedy happened.

"We have very good reason to believe that Mr. (Phillip) Paris was aware of fire-like events such as smoke and sparks that occurred over the summer," said Ard Ardan, the attorney for the pet owners.

Paris, a former Georgetown police officer who owned the Ponderosa Pet Resort, did not respond to a request for comment about the lawsuit.

The pet owners are seeking more than \$1 million in damages.

The facility had been running on an overloaded and aging electrical system before the fire, Ardan said.

"Ponderosa was definitely overloaded in the type of electric equipment it was running at any one time," he said. "There were fans running 24/7, AC units running, refrigerators running, blowers running, bug zappers plugged in and also air purifiers," he said.

Ardan declined to comment further about how he learned of the issues alleged in the suit.

Twenty-four pet owners who lost a total of 14 dogs filed the lawsuit Nov. 4 against Ponderosa Pet Resort, Paris and Buen Perro Holdings LLC.

The dogs the owners lost ranged in age from two 4-month old Shetland sheepdogs named Bunnie and Clyde to a 10-year-old pit bull named Canelo.

The lawsuit also asks a judge to issue a restraining order to prevent Paris from tearing down the pet facility at 2815 N. Austin Ave.

Paris has said through attorneys that he plans to destroy it, according to the lawsuit.

Ardan said he has not been allowed to see inside the building and his clients also haven't been allowed to view it without signing an agreement that they wouldn't sue.

The kennel fire that killed 75 puppies and other dogs started around 10:40 p.m. Sept. 18.

"The fire was initially ignited by an electrical source in the kennel area on the north side of the building which burned flammable building materials causing an accumulation of flames and deadly smoke," the lawsuit said.

Because no employees were at the building at the time, officials were only notified of the fire by a 911 caller about 15 minutes after it started, officials have said.

They said the first firefighters arrived around five minutes later, but by the time they entered the building, all the pets inside had been asphyxiated or burned alive

The kennel was unlicensed, had no fire detection equipment such as a smoke alarm and had no fire sprinkler

system, the lawsuit said.

It was not legally required to have fire detection equipment or a sprinkler system, city officials have said.

Georgetown Fire Chief John Sullivan said last week that the Fire Department still has not determined exactly what caused the fire.

The facility did have a motion-activated camera that captured the start of the fire, the lawsuit said. It said the camera was not monitored by any employee at that time.

Paris had told owners that either a staff member was present at the kennel or the 24-hour surveillance system's live feed was being monitored by a person, according to the suit. He also referred to the presence of other security systems at the kennel, the suit said.

After the fire, Paris "contradicted his prior reassurances and stated that they were 'in between systems' and that there were no such security systems in place at the time of the fire," according to the lawsuit.

No Central Texas city, including Georgetown, requires such facilities to be equipped with sprinkler systems or be staffed at all times, according to an American-Statesman survey of city regulations. And there are no state laws requiring sprinkler systems in pet boarding facilities.

The Georgetown Building Standards Commission approved several changes to the city's fire code Oct. 21, including requiring existing animal housing or care facilities to have a smoke or heat alarm system installed with automatic notification to a monitoring company, unless the facility has staffing onsite at all times, the city's website said.

The proposed changes include requiring new animal housing or care facilities to have electronically supervised carbon monoxide and smoke detection systems.

Automatic sprinkler systems would also be required at new facilities, unless the facility installs a fire alarm system with automatic electronic notification to an alarm company and fire-resistant interior materials.

The proposed changes will be presented to the City Council for possible amendment and/or adoption in January.

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed a bill during the third special legislative session in October to require smoke detectors and sprinkler systems in kennels that do not have staffers present at all times, with criminal penalties for noncompliance.

Gov. Greg Abbott, who set the agenda for the special session, did not ask the Legislature to address the bill, so it had no chance of becoming law.

texas politics - Quorum bust cost Dems more than \$1M

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Texas House Democrats spent more than \$1 million from various campaign coffers to fund their quorum break in July, when nearly 60 lawmakers left the state for Washington in an effort to kill a GOP-backed elections bill.

The money went toward two rented private planes, chartered vehicles, lodging and event space. It covered food, office supplies and COVID-19 testing materials. Some money went toward media consultants and security guards at the hotel where the lawmakers were staying.

New campaign finance reports filed Tuesday with the Texas Ethics Commission offered the first glimpse of how much lawmakers spent — and raised — on their cross-country quest to derail the GOP priority measure. Later in the summer, Republicans approved new voting and election regulations, now in effect, after Democrats eventually returned to Austin and reestablished a quorum.

When the House Democrats left for Washington, they only had enough cash on hand to fund a few nights on the road. But support for the quorum bust from Democratic backers was almost immediate, and donations started rolling in before the lawmakers touched down on the tarmac.

Most of them would spend more than a month in Washington, racking up expenses at the Washington Plaza Hotel on Thomas Circle, traveling to meetings on Capitol Hill and later coordinating virtual programming amid a COVID-19 outbreak within their ranks.

Campaign finance reports covering the last six months of the year show that the House Democratic Caucus, the primary entity bankrolling the effort, raised more than \$1.4 million between July and December and spent \$1.2 million over the same period, largely on expenses incurred during the trip.

The caucus footed the bill on nearly all travel, transportation and equipment costs associated with the Washington sojourn, including private air travel to Washington and meeting rooms at the hotel. Individual members paid for some meals and travel expenses using their own campaign dollars or personal bank accounts, and many said they did so without hesitation.

"I'll be honest and tell you that I didn't even think about it. I mean, because to me, money could not be a factor for what was on the line," Rep. Jasmine Crockett, D-Dallas, told the American-Statesman.

"Money was not at the forefront of my mind," said Rep. Jarvis Johnson, D-Houston. "As we were doing this, the sacrifice that we make to run for this office, we already understood what this job will cost us. So I wasn't concerned about money, I was more concerned about how we get out of Texas, protect Texans, protect voting rights of all citizens. That was my main concern."

Planning the departure

At the end of last year's regular legislative session, Democrats walked off the House floor to deny Republicans a quorum and block passage of a GOP elections bill that would make sweeping changes to the state's voting laws.

Republicans heralded the legislation as an effort to safeguard the state's voting system and restore public trust in election outcomes, despite the lack of evidence of widespread vote fraud. Democrats and voting rights groups said the measure would make it harder for Texans, particularly people of color, to cast ballots, calling it tantamount to

voter suppression.

Gov. Greg Abbott then ordered a 30-day special session and directed lawmakers to tackle 11 conservative priorities, including "election integrity." As the elections legislation advanced, Democratic leaders formulated a plan to persuade at least 51 of their colleagues to cross state lines and deny Republicans a quorum in the House.

"Historically, breaking quorum is a strategy that's only reserved for the most egregious abuses of power, you know, threats to the foundations of democracy itself," Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, told the Statesman. The elections bill "represented a kind of an existential threat to our democratic system. And what I said when we left the state was, 'We can debate issues, but we won't debate democracy itself.' And that, I think, kind of sums up why we left the state over this bill in particular."

They landed in Washington on July 12, capturing national media attention and drawing the ire of their GOP colleagues back home, who authorized arrest warrants for absent members.

House Democrats, aware their absence could only temporarily stall passage of the bill, spent the following weeks meeting with members of Congress, advocating for federal voting rights protections.

"It was important that Democrats show that we're willing and able to fight back," state Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie and chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, told the Statesman. "We said from the moment we got to Washington, D.C., that we know we cannot stop this bill in Austin forever. We know Abbott will call session after session, and they will ultimately pass it, but we were determined to kill it for that particular special session and use that time to elevate the issue in Washington. We did both of those things."

Getting out of Texas

The trip began with one of the single largest expenses the Democrats would pay: Nearly \$112,000 to rent two private planes from Executive Flightways to fly members to Washington.

In July, lawmakers told the Statesman that they decided to rent private planes to reduce the chance that members would change their minds or leak news of the plan before leaders were ready to make an announcement.

They also knew that House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, had the power to authorize arrest warrants and compel their attendance, but that power was limited to within the state. If he caught wind of their plan too early, lawmakers could be detained at the airport trying to board flights out of town.

"We all needed to leave the state at the same time, without anyone detecting our departure," Talarico said. "The decision was made by the caucus that the only way to accomplish that logistical feat was to use charter planes."

While getting the lawmakers to Washington posed the biggest logistical challenge, housing nearly 60 members and their staff in Washington for a month posed the biggest financial burden.

In addition to paying for hotel rooms, the Democrats rented out a series of conference rooms and meeting spaces, and a security officer was posted at the door, and meals were catered for members:

\$425,000 for lodging.

\$10,000 on gratuities for Washington Plaza Hotel staff.

\$13,500 for food and beverages.

\$9,690 for security, paid to the hotel.

During their time in Washington, lawmakers met with congressional leaders on Capitol Hill and hosted press

conferences and virtual programming for members. Media coverage was a priority for Democrats, but it was also costly: They spent more than \$20,000 on three media consultants to assist with handling the flood of interview requests from the press and setting up production equipment for an MSNBC town hall about the quorum break.

Administrative costs such as office supplies, room reservations and technology also ate up a significant portion of funds, as did transportation costs:

\$160,000 for event spaces, including meeting rooms and audiovisual equipment to make those spaces functional.

\$1,000 on office supplies.

\$18,000 on chartered vehicles, rented cars and ride-hailing applications.

One week into the Washington stay, a new challenge emerged: Three lawmakers tested positive for COVID-19, and more would follow. The caucus began regularly testing members and staff, spending \$534 on tests from CVS and \$2,660 on tests from GW Medical Faculty Associates.

Fundraising

Housing nearly 60 people for an undetermined period of time is expensive, and lawmakers quickly turned their focus to fundraising, to collect enough donations to ensure they could continue to stay away from Austin and to deny Republicans the members needed to vote on legislation.

Turner said the caucus leadership never considered asking members to pay their own way, and credits Reps. Armando Walle, D-Houston, and Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, with spearheading the caucus's fundraising campaign.

"Any time you're traveling for an extended length of time, it is expensive," Turner said. "We knew it was going to require a pretty focused and sustained fundraising effort to enable us to stay out there for an extended period of time."

A source close to the caucus said \$1.2 million was raised in conjunction with the quorum bust.

The largest contribution came from Powered by People, Democrat Beto O'Rourke's political action committee. O'Rourke ultimately raised more than \$700,000 for the House Democrats.

"When we heard that they were leaving Texas, we emailed everyone on our list and tweeted, posted on Facebook and Instagram — every way we could possibly reach people to raise money for them and make sure that they had that clear support from Texas and around the country," O'Rourke told the Statesman at the time. "That's both moral support — there were thousands of unique donors — and then financial support of not having to worry about resources to be able to stay there and stay in this fight."

Other big dollar donations poured in to support the effort, including these contributions of \$20,000 or more:

\$100,000 from End Citizens United, a PAC.

\$100,000 from the Texas Justice and Education Fund.

\$30,000 from the Communication Workers of America.

\$25,000 from Lee Fikes, a Dallas oil executive.

\$25,000 from the UAW SW Reg Cap Council.

\$25,000 from American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

\$20,000 from the United Steelworkers PA Fund.

Crockett, the Dallas lawmaker, said that support allowed members like herself to focus on meeting with members of Congress and advocating for the passage of federal voting rights protections.

"Beto stepped up in a huge way and had our back. (U.S. House) Speaker (Nancy) Pelosi had our back. So we got love from everywhere, I mean, there was money pouring in to sustain us. So I appreciate everyone. That really was kind of like, 'We want to make this as painless as possible for you.' But I would have gone through as much financial pain as I needed to under the circumstances," Crockett said.

But members did end up paying for some expenses out of pocket. Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin, said he spent personal money to wash his clothes and buy extra supplies.

"I didn't really pack for beyond 10 days," he said, noting that he was optimistic the stalemate with House leadership would be resolved quickly. "Whether it was (laundry), meals and having to buy other necessities, I was using my own money. It was tough because I wasn't working, so I was making less money than normal."

Stalled voting rights bill

The special session ended without passage of the elections bill, but Abbott made good on his promise to call lawmakers back to Austin.

By mid-August, enough Democrats had returned to Austin to produce a narrow quorum. Most of the remaining members returned to their homes in Texas to consider their next move, while a small contingent stayed behind in Washington to continue protesting the legislation, reintroduced in the second special session.

Republicans pushed through the bill over Democratic objections, and Abbott signed it into law in September.

It makes sweeping changes to voting rules in the state, including banning drive-thru and overnight voting. It also expands power afforded to partisan poll watchers, creates a slew of new crimes tied to the election process, and creates new identification requirements for mail-in ballots. The law also requires early voting polling sites to be open at least nine hours a day, up from the previous eight-hour requirement — but opening no earlier than 6 a.m. and closing no later than 10 p.m.

The U.S. Justice Department sued Texas in federal court to block several portions of the law, following five separate lawsuits challenging the law filed by voting and civil rights groups. Those challenges are pending.

Abbott defended the bill after the Justice Department lawsuit, saying it increases voting hours, makes vote harvesting a felony and works to restrict illegal mail-in voting.

"Only those who qualify can vote by mail," he said. "In Texas, it is easier to vote but harder to cheat."

Meanwhile, federal voting rights protections are still stalled in Congress. Senate Republicans on Wednesday blocked Democrats' move to advance the voting rights bill championed by the Biden administration.

"Going to D.C. was a move to try and get Congress to act, but for me it was twofold," Johnson, the Houston lawmaker, said. "I'm sending a message to the Texas Republicans that I'm not going to sit here and let you treat me and the constituents that voted for me like dirt. If this happens again in the next session ... then the fight is on again."

We recommend Talarico in House 50 Democratic primary

February 17, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: News | 361 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

When the Republican-controlled Texas Legislature gerrymandered Round Rock-based House District 52 last fall to make it nearly impossible for incumbent Democratic Rep. James Talarico to retain the seat, he wasn't deterred.

The former public schoolteacher just decided to pack up and move a few miles south to District 50 to run for the House seat being vacated by Democratic Rep. Celia Israel, who is running for mayor of Austin.

"If they think they can keep me off the House floor, they better think again," Talarico said in a tweet at the time.

That kind of pluck is indicative of the character Talarico has shown throughout his highly effective first two terms in the Texas House. We think Democrats in District 50 would be wise to vote for Talarico in the March 1 primary. Early voting continues through Feb. 25.

During his first term, Talarico helped draft school finance reform legislation signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott that provided Texas schools with \$11.6 billion in new education funding. He followed that up last legislative session with a proposal to raise starting public schoolteachers' salaries to \$70,000 per year. The bill didn't get much traction in the Republican-led Legislature, but Talarico has vowed to try again if re-elected.

Talarico, who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 2018, did convince enough Republicans last session to help him pass a bill he authored that caps the out-of-pocket cost of prescription insulin at \$25 for people who have health insurance. Gov. Abbott signed the bill into law in September.

Talarico also filed legislation to legalize cannabis and expunge past marijuana convictions. He supports abortion rights, expanding Medicaid and fighting climate change with energy efficiency standards and targets for greenhouse gas emissions reductions.

Talarico's endorsements include U.S. Reps. Lloyd Doggett and Joaquin Castro, former U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke, as well as the Sierra Club, Texas State Employees Union, and others.

David Alcorta, a city of Austin employee who worked as a field organizer for O'Rourke's 2018 Senate campaign and as a legislative aide, is opposing Talarico. Alcorta is a sincere candidate but he can't match his opponent's legislative record and experience, which is why we recommend Talarico in this primary.

American-Statesman Editorial Board

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Local race for redrawn state House district attracts 4 Republicans - Democratic incumbent moves to bluer territory

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Author: Niki Griswold; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 1643 Words

Page: A1

[OpenURL Link](#)

Republican mapmakers had an answer to the increasingly Democratic Central Texas delegation in the Capitol when they redrew a Williamson County district to favor a GOP candidate.

Four Republicans are running in Texas House District 52, an open seat after Democratic incumbent James Talarico, suddenly facing longer odds for reelection, decided to move to a nearby district in blue Travis County and run there.

Talarico, who has represented House District 52 since 2019, served on the House Calendars, Public Education, and Juvenile Justice and Family Issues committees. He also was among the Democrats who broke quorum over the summer to fight against a GOP elections bill.

"I was one of only two Democrats to be completely gerrymandered out of my district," Talarico said of the once-a-decade redistricting process last fall. "Some people have told me to take that as a badge of honor. I asked hard questions on the floor of the House and I caused some trouble, so that's probably why I was targeted like this."

Republicans see the district as an opportunity to bolster the GOP majority in the Texas House.

Though lawmakers in the fall largely shifted district lines to favor incumbents, House District 52, which now includes the more rural and conservative eastern half of Williamson County, was one of a few exceptions. Joe Biden carried the district by more than 10 percentage points in 2020, but voters within the boundaries of the new district favored Donald Trump by 6 points. The redrawn lines also changed the district's racial demographics, increasing the proportion of white voters.

Though House District 52 used to cover Round Rock, much of the city is carved out and folded into a neighboring district in the new map.

The winner of the four-way GOP primary will face off against the only Democratic candidate. If no candidate wins a majority of the vote in the GOP primary, the top two vote-getters will advance to a runoff in May. Early voting will run through Feb. 25. Election day is March 1.

These are the candidates:

Caroline Harris

Harris, 28, has lived in Round Rock her entire life and has worked at the Legislature since 2015, spending the past five years as a policy adviser for state Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, who has endorsed her. Harris said her legislative experience makes her the best candidate to represent House District 52, pointing toward her work with Hughes in passing some of the most conservative legislation of recent sessions, including the GOP election overhaul law and the six-week abortion ban.

Harris said she decided to run for the seat over the summer after House Democrats broke quorum in an effort to stall the elections bill.

"I just decided, you know what, that's the last straw. Even if you disagree on a bill, you were elected by the people to be there and to do the people's work. It really bothered me that that was my representative who walked off the

job," Harris said, referring to Talarico. "I think this district is conservative and deserves to be represented by someone who's going to support the police, work on securing the border and make sure that parents have a say in what their kids are taught."

Harris volunteers with her church, where she teaches second grade Sunday school.

She said securing the border would be one of her top legislative priorities.

Nelson Jarrin

Born in Beaumont and raised in Houston, Jarrin began working at the Capitol when he joined the Texas Legislative Council as an attorney in 2010, drafting more than 800 bills and amendments for lawmakers. Jarrin then spent nearly three years working for state Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, as his legislative director and general counsel, before joining a Dallas-based nonprofit that works to improve access to mental health services for children, veterans and law enforcement officers. Now an attorney for a communications firm, the 40-year-old said he decided last summer to run for House District 52.

"I felt like our current representative, James Talarico, was trying to change our community and our values and to make us more like another Austin or Travis County, and that's not why people move to Williamson County," Jarrin said. "We intentionally moved here because of the quality of life and the schools and everything else that makes this the best place to live, work, and raise a family, and the way he was voting at the Capitol was against those values. So I decided that I had the right credentials and background and the ability to go toe-to-toe on policy that I wanted to step up and serve my community."

Jarrin said his top two legislative priorities would be securing the border and taking politics out of education — both of which he said are personal for him because he has a second grader in the Round Rock school district and because his father legally emigrated from Ecuador. Jarrin is endorsed by a number of political organizations and elected officials, including Hispanic Republicans of Texas, Texas Alliance for Life and Schwertner.

Patrick McGuinness

McGuinness has lived with his family in Central Texas for the past 30 years, having moved to Austin in 1991 to work at Motorola. The 57-year-old software engineer has spent his career working in the technology sector, and he is currently a machine learning engineer at Dell EMC.

McGuinness described himself as a constitutional conservative and has been an active participant in local Republican politics, having served as a precinct chair, vice chair of the Travis County Republican Party and founder of the North Austin Republicans club.

McGuinness garnered 41% of the vote in the 2010 general election as the Republican nominee for House District 50 in Travis County.

He said he collected 750 signatures to file by petition to run in the House District 52 race and believes his experience working in technology positions makes him the best representative for the district as the tech industry drives growth in the area.

"I've been part of global organizations like Motorola and Dell; I've been part of very small startups. So I know big companies, I know small companies, I know business, I know technology. ... Very few folks who are working in the Texas House or in the Legislature have that background," McGuinness said. "I've been living the life that a lot of folks in this district have lived — a career in high technology, I've been a property tax-paying homeowner for 30 years here in Central Texas, and we've raised our kids and put them through the schools here, and I felt I could be a great representative for this district."

Among the issues McGuinness hopes to address are lowering property taxes, promoting school choice, securing the

border and fighting vaccine mandates.

Jonathan Schober

Schober, who will be 51 years old on election day, is a longtime resident of the Austin area and a father of seven children, whom he and his wife have home-schooled from kindergarten through 12th grade. After serving in the Air Force, Schober spent nearly 20 years working at Dell and for the past six years has worked in health care technology. Schober said he's been involved in politics as the IT director for the Republican Party of Texas in the late 1990s and as a citizen activist. He said he's running for office to defend Texans' freedom, security and prosperity.

"I'm here because I'm the kind of guy that runs to the sounds of the guns, and I truly believe that we've got great issues that are at risk, and I want to be a part of that grassroots group that goes to Austin and sets the policies and leadership in the right direction," Schober said. "I'm disappointed that, in the state of Texas, we have had businesses declared essential versus nonessential. So I'm running to make sure that we don't have an executive that overreaches his power again and makes these kinds of decisions."

Schober is an advocate for education reform and school choice, as well as property tax relief, fighting vaccine mandates and improving border security.

Luis Echegaray

The only Democrat in the race, Echegaray is guaranteed a spot in November's general election. The 51-year-old is a U.S. Army veteran and former teacher and now works as director of sales for a consumer goods company. He and his family have been in Texas since 2010, and he said he decided to get involved in politics through block walking and phone banking during the 2020 election after he lost his previous job, and therefore his health insurance, due to the pandemic. That experience made him a strong advocate of expanding Medicaid by raising the income limits so more families are eligible for the program. He said he would prioritize increasing public education funding and access to mental health resources.

Echegaray said that although the district has been redrawn to favor Republicans, he still believes he is the more electable candidate based on the issues he wants to address.

"I feel that the voters of this district, I'm confident in their ability to pick their representative instead of a party in power picking their voters for them. I think that the people in this district too are seeking sensible solutions to priorities that affect both Democrats and Republicans, such as property tax relief, modernizing the energy grid ... increasing rural broadband, increasing funding for public education ... helping veterans, promoting job growth and affordable child care," Echegaray said. "I'll talk to anyone as long as it's a sensible solution to a problem that affects everyone. I'm an open book. I have an open mind. ... Obviously, I don't have all the answers. But I'm willing to work with people to solve the problem."

Fundraising

According to the most recent campaign finance reports, here's how much cash on hand each candidate's campaign has:

Harris: \$50,109.21

Jarrin: \$128,254.10 (Jarrin also loaned \$50,000 of his personal money to his campaign)

McGuinness: \$303,015.74 (McGuinness also loaned \$400,000 of his personal money to his campaign)

Schober: \$7,211.80 (Schober also loaned \$600 of his personal money to his campaign)

Echegaray: \$10,176.43 (Echegaray also loaned \$1,288.14 of his personal money to his campaign)

Recap of guidance for the 2022 primaries

March 1, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Section: News | 441 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Texans who didn't vote early in the 2022 primary elections have one last chance to cast a ballot: Today is Election Day.

Americans of all political stripes are concerned about the state of our cherished democracy, so it's crucial that we exercise our fundamental right to vote. Unfortunately, primary elections in Texas typically generate weak turnouts – only 12% of registered Republican voters and 13% of registered Democrats cast ballots statewide in the 2020 presidential primary elections. In today's primary election contests, only about 10 percent of registered Travis County voters voted early or by mail.

Low voter participation is perplexing in today's political climate, considering the outcry about Republican-led efforts to restrict access to the ballot.

Texans can – and should – do better. In this year's Democratic and Republican primary elections, voters have a chance to nominate the candidates who best reflect their values in races for Congress, the governor's office, attorney general, state legislative seats, county commissioners court and more. We urge all registered voters to participate in democracy by casting a ballot.

Below is a recap of the Austin American-Statesman's recommendations in 16 key races. You can learn more about the candidates in these and other races online at: statesman.com/opinion

Unclear about what district you're in? Find out here: <https://wrm.capitol.texas.gov/home>

U.S. House District 17: Mary Jo Woods is unopposed in the Democratic primary; no recommendation in the Republican primary in this race.

U.S. House 21: Claudia Zapata, Democratic primary; U.S. Rep. Chip Roy (incumbent), Republican primary

U.S. House District 35: State Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, Democratic primary; Jennifer Sundt, Republican primary

U.S. House District 37: U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, Democratic primary; Jenny Garcia Sharon, Republican primary

Governor: Beto O'Rourke, Democratic primary; Gov. Greg Abbott, Republican primary

Lieutenant Governor: Mike Collier, Democratic primary; Lieutenant Gov. Dan Patrick, Republican primary

Attorney General: Rochelle Garza, Democratic primary; Eva Guzman, Republican primary

Agriculture Commissioner: Ed Ireson, Democratic primary; James White, Republican primary

Comptroller: Janet T. Dudding, Democratic primary; Comptroller Glenn Hegar, Republican Party

Land Commissioner: Jay Kleberg, Democratic primary; Don Minton, Republican primary

Railroad Commissioner: Dawayne Tipton, Republican primary; Luke Warford is unopposed in the Democratic primary

Texas Senate 25: Robert Walsh is unopposed in the Democratic primary; Sen. Donna Campbell, Republican primary

Texas House 45: Rep. Erin Zwiener, Democratic primary; Michelle M. Lopez is unopposed in the Republican primary

Texas House 50: Rep. James Talarico, Democratic primary; Victor Johnson is unopposed in the Republican primary

Texas House 51: Maria Luisa "Lulu" Flores, Democratic primary; Robert Reynolds is unopposed in the Republican primary

Travis County Commissioner, Precincts 2 and 4: Commissioner Brigid Shea and Commissioner Margaret J. Gomez, Democratic primaries. There are no Republican candidates.

American-Statesman Editorial Board

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Election 2022 - 4 area Texas GOP House races heading to runoffs

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[OpenURL Link](#)

The Republican nominations for four open seats in Texas House districts surrounding Austin will be decided in runoffs. The four districts were all drawn during last year's redistricting process to favor Republican candidates, so the winners will have an advantage heading into the November general election.

Meanwhile, the Democratic primary in an open Texas House district anchored in East and South Austin drawn to favor a Democrat, resulted in an outright winner: Maria Luisa "Lulu" Flores, an attorney and longtime activist for progressive causes.

Texas House District 52

Two Republican newcomers are headed to a runoff election to be the GOP nominee in the race to fill a Williamson County seat in the Texas House. According to unofficial primary results from the Texas secretary of state's office, Patrick McGuinness, a software engineer, won just over 35% of the vote in Tuesday's Republican primary, while Caroline Harris, a policy adviser for state Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, captured about 31%, among four candidates.

Lawmakers redrew House District 52 to favor the GOP last fall, leading the Democratic incumbent, Rep. James Talarico, to move and run in a nearby, solidly blue Travis County district instead.

The newly drawn District 52 now includes the more rural and conservative eastern half of Williamson County, and while President Joe Biden carried the district by more than 10 percentage points in 2020, voters within the boundaries of the new district favored former President Donald Trump by 6 points.

The Republican candidate who wins the May 24 runoff will face off against the district's sole Democratic candidate, Luis Echegaray, in the general election in November.

Texas House District 19

Indicted Austin police officer Justin Berry will face off against former Austin City Council Member Ellen Troxclair in the GOP runoff for Texas House District 19. Berry is one of the 19 Austin police officers recently indicted on felony assault charges for their conduct during the May 2020 racial justice protests; his campaign has largely focused on public safety and supporting law enforcement.

Berry narrowly lost to Democrat Vikki Goodwin in 2020 in House District 47, which covers a large portion of western Travis County. Troxclair served on the Austin City Council from 2015 to 2019, representing southwest Austin.

According to unofficial primary election results, Troxclair won about 38% of the vote, with Berry close behind at just over 35%, among four candidates.

The winner of the Republican runoff will face off against Pam Baggett, the race's sole Democratic candidate.

House District 19 is based in the Hill Country, encompassing Burnet, Blanco, Kendall, and Gillespie Counties, as well as part of far west Travis County.

Texas House District 73

After a three-way race in the GOP primary, two Republicans are advancing to a runoff to represent Comal County and the western half of Hays County in the Texas House. Former New Braunfels mayor Barron Casteel will be going up against Carrie Isaac, a nonprofit executive and wife of former state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs.

Based on unofficial voting numbers, it was an extremely tight race between the two candidates who came within one percentage point of each other. Casteel won about 45.6% of the vote, while Isaac captured nearly 44.8%.

The runoff winner will face Democrat Justin Calhoun in the fall.

Texas House District 17

Smithville City Council Member Stan Gerdes, garnered nearly 30% of the vote, and Bastrop County Judge Paul Pape, won about 28% in the GOP primary in House District 17, the top finishers among five candidates.

The Republican winner will face Democrat Madeline Eden in the November general election.

House District 17 covers Bastrop, Burleson, Caldwell, Lee, and Milam counties.

Texas House District 51

In the Democratic primary for an open seat in a Texas House district in Travis County, Maria Luisa "Lulu" Flores clinched the Democratic nomination with more than 60% of the vote, easily besting seven other candidates.

Flores, a former Planned Parenthood board member and former president of the National Women's Political Caucus, campaigned as a champion of women's rights.

Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin, has represented the district since 2003, but announced last year he would not seek reelection, instead launching a campaign for Congress.

Covering a wide swath of central and southeastern Travis County, District 51 has been a Democratic stronghold.

Flores will face Robert Reynolds, the only Republican candidate in the race, in November.

More inside

Incumbents win statewide judicial race primaries. 2B

APD asked to ignore abortions - City Council wants no investigations into them

July 22, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Ryan Autullo; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 643 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Thursday's council vote on the abortion-related resolution is more of a recommendation than a directive, as the Police Department has no legal obligation to accept orders from the council.

Vowing to fight back against Texas Republicans ahead of a statewide abortion ban, the Austin City Council has asked the city's Police Department to ignore the law by refusing to investigate any medical provider who terminates a pregnancy.

Additionally, the council amended a city ordinance to prohibit discrimination based on reproductive health action and asked the city manager to launch a public education program on long-term birth control, including vasectomies for men. They also asked the city manager to evaluate benefits to city employees seeking reproductive health care that is no longer lawful in Texas.

"We are sending the message we will continue to fight for reproductive freedom," Council Member Vanessa Fuentes said.

The Thursday vote — in a special called meeting that brought council members back a week early from their summer council meeting break — follows last month's decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, which had allowed a nationwide protection for abortion and comes days before a near-total abortion ban takes effect in Texas.

The City Council's initiative is known as the GRACE Act — Guarding the Right to Abortion Care for Everyone. It was first proposed weeks ago by Council Member Chito Vela.

This action will play well with Austin Democrats but also is likely to escalate an ongoing feud between the City Council and Texas Republican leaders, political opponents who have long quarreled over everything from policing to tent encampments to grocery bags.

More times than not, the state has come out on the winning side, often crafting a statewide law to cancel an action by Austin.

But if that happens, Austin could have allies in other Texas cities. Denton passed a similar measure aimed at discouraging prosecutions related to abortions, and four other cities — San Antonio, Waco, Dallas and Grand Prairie — are in various stages of discussion. El Paso has rejected it.

In Austin, there is an argument to be made that it was unnecessary to ask police not to investigate abortions, because Travis County District Attorney José Garza, an elected Democrat who has discretion over which cases to pursue, has previously said his office will not prosecute abortions.

Flanked at City Hall by several Texas House Democrats, several City Council members said they are prepared to use any method available to them to protect a woman's ability to get an abortion. The same holds true, they said, for laws that protect same-sex couples and transgender people.

"I never thought we'd be in this place," Council Member Ann Kitchen said.

Texas House Democrats in attendance were Sheryl Cole, Gina Hinojosa, James Talarico and Celia Israel, as well as

Lulu Flores, the Democratic nominee in House District 51.

"We are awake, our claws are out, and we're ready to fight," said Israel, who is leaving her seat to run for Austin mayor in November.

Gov. Greg Abbott's office did not respond to a message left seeking comment.

The Police Department did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Thursday's council vote on the abortion-related resolution is more of a recommendation than a directive, as the Police Department has no legal obligation to accept orders from the council.

All four items passed 10-0, but with a notable absence.

Council Member Mackenzie Kelly, the council's most conservative member, said she underwent surgery Thursday and that the procedure had been scheduled before the meeting.

While voting for these measures was a no-brainer for left-leaning council members, the same would not have been true for Kelly, who has Republican supporters in her Northwest Austin district who are more likely to oppose abortion rights than the average Austin resident.

Thursday's council vote on the abortion-related resolution is more of a recommendation than a directive, as the Police Department has no legal obligation to accept orders from the council.

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Talarico calls out 'spineless, soulless' Democrats

July 24, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Page: A2

[OpenURL Link](#)

The young Texas House member who took the stage at a recent political convention in Dallas really let the leaders of the national Democratic Party have it. In a single sentence he called them "spineless" and "soulless" money-grubbers with little or no interest in improving the lives of ordinary citizens.

A casual observer might have come away thinking, "Boy, the Republicans are really playing hardball with just four months to go before the 2022 midterms."

But the politician delivering that damning message was, in fact, a loyal Democrat and arguably an emerging leader in the state party who wandered into the political wilderness just five years after he was born and has proved at times almost comically inept when it comes to finding his way out since.

Meet James Talarico, a Harvard-educated former schoolteacher who got elected to the House at age 29 from a suburban district north of Austin. In just his second term, he was named one of the best legislators by Texas Monthly, which described him as "whip-smart" and compared him to "Encyclopedia Brown on the trail of his latest case."

Top Republicans were also quick to pick up on the whole "whip-smart" thing. In a conversation that was secretly recorded, then-House Speaker Dennis Bonnen told one of his lieutenants in 2019 that the GOP needed to recruit a top-shelf candidate to run against "that Talarico kid" as a way to prevent him from rising through the ranks in the Legislature. And Bonnen fully understood how someone elected at a young age can rise in Texas politics: He was just 24 when he arrived in the House.

Failing to defeat him in 2020, House Republicans last year redrew Talarico's Democratic-leaning district to make him a ripe GOP target. But Talarico probably outmaneuvered them. After Democratic Rep. Celia Israel announced she would run for Austin mayor and vacate the safe district that neighbors his own, Talarico announced that he'd simply move a few miles down the road and run for the newly open seat.

The larger message Talarico delivered during his five-minute address at the Democratic State Convention was less about thumbing the old bulls of his party right in the eye. It was more about expressing his frustration that even though Democrats control the White House and both houses of Congress, they've been unable to stop Republicans in statehouses around the country from nibbling away at voting rights and reproductive freedoms.

"The most our national party leaders can muster is spineless talking points and soulless fundraising emails," Talarico told the delegates. "National Democrats, you know, the ones who fly into Texas to fundraise and then don't spend a penny of that money in our state, they don't know how to fight.

"Those national Democrats are comfortable on the coasts and comfortable with the status quo."

He finished his remarks highlighting what he called the "scrappy" way Democrats in Texas have sought to blunt the GOP initiatives in what for decades has been the nation's most reliably red state. The delegates cheered when he reminded them of last year's quorum bust in the House when most of the Democrats bolted for Washington and stayed gone for weeks in a vain effort to block a measure they believed would undermine voting rights.

And he invoked Democrats of generations gone by, like Lyndon Johnson and Barbara Jordan, as examples whom contemporary Democrats should emulate.

Talarico's message was effectively delivered. And his criticisms of the national leaders, though perhaps a bit simplistic, were on target.

But they were also delivered into the teeth of a stiff headwind for his party. The national Democrats he did not name are at once in charge and unpopular. Very unpopular in his home state. And that, historically, has been a bad omen for his party heading into a midterm election.

Texas Democrats were routed in both midterms during Barack Obama's two terms as president, just as Republicans were bloodied in Donald Trump's only midterm.

But Talarico's short speech could have a shelf life that outlasts the 2022 election cycle, no matter how it turns out in November. In the days after he delivered his remarks in Dallas, national news outlets sought him for on-air interviews — just as they did during the quorum bust that took Democrats to the nation's capital, which, as it turns out, is also the nation's media capital.

Talarico was able to figure out the workings of the Texas House not long after his 30th birthday. And at 33, and still the Legislature's youngest member, he appears to have figured out how to craft a message that separates himself from many of his Democratic peers under the dome of the state Capitol — and not to be shy about taking on the powers that be in his political party.

John C. Moritz

Columnist

USA TODAY NETWORK

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New plan for juvenile justice - Interim director says 'rural locations of our facilities are very problematic'

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Chronically scandal-plagued and short-staffed, the state agency in charge of rehabilitating some of the most troubled and dangerous young offenders in Texas needs yet another overhaul that would end the practice of shipping youths off to remote institutions far from the state's population centers.

That was the message from the interim director of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department to a legislative panel this month and endorsed in principle by several of its members.

"The rural locations of our facilities are very problematic, given the number of employees we need to serve the high number of youth in those communities," said Shandra Carter, who took charge of the agency after its executive director abruptly resigned in April. "A long-term solution definitely would be to build smaller facilities in strategically identified areas. They would have to be in locations where we could compete with the salaries, where there is an available labor pool."

Carter's testimony came amid an ongoing federal investigation into allegations of sexual abuse and other mistreatment of offenders by Juvenile Justice Department staff members at some facilities and amid reports that the institutions are so short-staffed that offenders are sometimes confined to their rooms up to 23 hours per day with no access to the common restrooms.

The confinement is not punishment, Carter said. It's because the institutions lack sufficient staffers to supervise and attempt to rehabilitate the youths in their care. "I have enough physical beds," she said. "But I do not have enough staff to supervise those beds."

Texas Youth Commission overhaul

Amid allegations of abuse more than a decade ago, the agency known as the Texas Youth Commission was restructured and renamed, and its inmate population was drastically reduced as state leaders sought to shift its emphasis from punishment to rehabilitation in fewer prisonlike lockups.

But the reconstituted department has long been hampered by the inability to recruit and retain staffers with the skills needed to care for the young offenders, 85% of whom suffer from moderate to severe mental illness. Almost half have been placed on suicide watch, Carter said.

The pay for frontline staffers has been raised in recent months, Carter said. But that still has not stemmed what she called "the Great Resignation" exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and rampant inflation. The agency's in-custody population is about 600 in its five secure lockups, but it has staffing to effectively manage only about 240 young offenders, she said.

"I can't even guarantee my staff will have enough time to go home and see their families," she said. "I can't even guarantee they're going to get a bathroom break."

Agency a 'forgotten stepchild'

State Rep. Gene Wu, a Houston Democrat who serves on the House Juvenile Justice and Family Issues Committee and a lawyer who in private practice represents troubled youths, said the Juvenile Justice Department has been

historically underfunded by the Legislature and often ignored by state leaders at least in part because youths in its care often come from an unstable family life and are not a natural constituency.

"The problem is that TJJD has always been the forgotten stepchild of the criminal justice system," said Wu, acknowledging the irony of his metaphor given the agency's mission. "It's small enough where people will just kind of forget about it and just don't want to deal with it."

"Small," at least by state government standards, is an accurate description of the department. In the two-year budget adopted by the Legislature last year, the agency has an authorized workforce of about 2,500 full-time employees and was allocated just under \$320 million for each year.

The adult prison system, by comparison, has nearly 40,000 full-time employees and spends upward of \$3.4 billion a year. And the Department of Family and Protective Services has 13,000 full-time workers and an annual budget of \$2.36 billion, nearly all of it devoted to Child Protective Services.

Complicating matters for the Juvenile Justice Department is that it was not exempted from the 5% budget reduction demanded from most state agencies as state leaders reallocated funds to help pay for Gov. Greg Abbott's \$4 billion border security initiative, known as Operation Lone Star.

State Rep. James Talarico, an Austin-area Democrat, said state leaders have little excuse for underfunding the agency in the wake of reports from Comptroller Glenn Hegar that lawmakers can expect to begin their next budget deliberations with a \$27 billion surplus.

"But I don't want to just restore funding for a broken system," said Talarico, also a member of the panel that heard Carter's testimony. "We have an opportunity here to transform the system. We've got to get past the soft-on-crime, tough-on-crime debates. Those are from the 20th century. In the 21st century, the debate is, how are you dumb on crime or smart on crime?"

Like Carter and Wu, Talarico said large, remote institutions where expert staffing is hard to find should be scrapped and replaced with smaller facilities closer to population centers.

"We can fix this," Talarico said. "Out of the word 'emergency' is the word 'emerge.' Things come out of crises, and hopefully this can be the last crisis for this agency and these kids."

Justice Department inquiry

In October, the U.S. Justice Department announced an investigation into conditions at the state's juvenile justice facilities to determine "whether Texas provides children confined in the facilities reasonable protection from physical and sexual abuse by staff and other residents, excessive use of chemical restraints and excessive use of isolation."

The Juvenile Justice Department and Abbott's office have said they are cooperating with federal investigators. The inquiry followed a formal complaint by two watchdog groups alleging rampant sexual victimization of in-custody youths by agency staffers, excessive use of force and inadequate mental health care.

That same month, a youth development coach at a juvenile lockup in Brownwood was arrested after an investigation found he had engaged in improper sexual activity with a person in custody.

Bad memories and cold sweats

That arrest, along with the allegations that prompted the Justice Department inquiry, stirred memories that Jennifer Toon has harbored but seldom publicly vocalized since she was a teenager in the 1990s, when she was placed in the custody of the old Texas Youth Commission.

"Remembering and talking about that time gives me nightmares, breaks me out in cold sweats, like, just sitting here," Toon told the legislative panel.

State Rep. Valoree Swanson, a Republican from the Houston suburb of Spring, asked Toon whether large facilities are better able to keep young offenders safe because there would be "more eyes" on the lookout for abuse.

"Why would it be better in a small facility where there are fewer eyes watching?" Swanson said.

Toon replied that sexual abuse and other transgressions at the Youth Commission's remote institution were so widespread that little effort was made to conceal the activity.

"Everybody knows nobody's doing anything about it, so it must be OK. So we must deserve it," Toon said, describing the mindset of the in-custody youths at the time.

"That makes a lot of sense," Swanson said. "I can definitely see that. They're out in the middle of nowhere and everybody works there, and you're scared to lose your job because there's no other big employers around. And (it's) the whole culture thing."

Alycia Welch, associate director of the Prison and Jail Innovation Lab at the University of Texas' LBJ School of Public Affairs, said any effort to reshape Texas' approach to juvenile justice should include moving away from putting punishment ahead of rehabilitation.

"Trying to punish out certain behaviors is only going to make it worse," Welch said. "What seems like a lighter approach is actually a much harder approach. Programs and services are intense. They really require youth to dig into a past and really understand what's happening in their minds, what's happening with their behavior and how that can be changed."

Elect these Democrats to legislative seats

October 23, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Page: D5

[OpenURL Link](#)

Here are the American-Statesman's recommendations in Austin-area legislative races on the Nov. 8 ballot. Early voting begins Monday.

Texas Senate 21

Zaffirini gets things done, more than any other lawmaker in the state's history

If there is a more effective and accomplished lawmaker in the Texas Legislature than Democratic Sen. Judith Zaffirini, we're not sure who it might be.

The first Hispanic woman elected to the state senate, Zaffirini has served in the legislature for 36 years, and she holds the record for passing more bills than any state lawmaker in Texas history. Zaffirini leads with intelligence, conscience, dedication to her constituents and a bipartisan spirit. She champions abortion rights while noting that she, personally, is "pro-life."

Two other Texans – Republican Julie Dahlberg and Libertarian Arthur DiBianca – are running for Senate District 21, which stretches from Laredo to Austin. We recommend Zaffirini, who is by far the best candidate.

Zaffirini supports Democratic values, including expanding Medicaid and access to health care, gun safety measures, environmental protection. A supporter of the 2nd Amendment, she would back raising the gun purchase age to 21, enacting red flag laws and implementing universal background checks.

"I value people's lives more than I value guns," she told our board.

A leader on climate issues, Zaffirini has passed 52 bills related to water, wastewater, radioactive, medical and industrial waste, oil spills and air pollution. But she understands the outsized role oil and gas play in the state's economy. The chair of the Eagle Ford Shale Legislative Caucus, Zaffirini said she advocates "sensible regulations that adequately balance economic development with environmental concerns."

She told our editorial board the recapture system that forces the Austin Independent School District to return hundreds of millions of its tax dollars to the state is "problematic," but said there is currently no political will to change it. "The solution to the problems related to recapture is for the state to meet its responsibility and pay its fair share of education," Zaffirini said. "That will also by the way, reduce (locally assessed) property taxes."

We recommend District 21 voters support her re-election.

Texas Senate 25

Walsh offers a forward-leaning vision, making him the choice over incumbent Donna Campbell

Incumbent Republican Sen. Donna Campbell has held the sprawling, six-county Senate District 25 seat, which runs from San Antonio across the Hill Country into southern Travis County, since winning a special election in 2012.

As she seeks a third full term, Campbell's hard-right conservative views will no doubt resonate with a sizable portion of the district's rural voters. But her opponent, Democratic software engineer Robert Walsh, told our board

he is working to bridge partisan divides, seeking out conservative voters on the campaign trail to discuss the issues and find common ground. Walsh offers a forward-leaning vision for Senate District 25, vowing to champion policies to protect the environment, expand rural health care and revamp regulatory agencies that are too cozy with industry. We recommend Walsh for election in District 25.

Campbell, a retired ophthalmologist and practicing emergency room physician, did not respond to requests to meet with our editorial board. The Senate veteran co-sponsored Senate Bill 8 — the draconian Texas abortion ban that does not allow exceptions for pregnancies by rape or incest — and has targeted the City of Austin's ability to contract with abortion providers. Campbell also co-sponsored irresponsible legislation allowing most adult Texans to carry a handgun openly and without a license.

Walsh said he would work to overturn the abortion ban and a provision that incentivizes private citizens to file a civil lawsuit against anyone who knowingly "aids or abets" an abortion. Currently under a court challenge, the provision instructs courts to award plaintiffs at least \$10,000 in damages from defendants.

Walsh vows to push for reforms at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), which has jurisdiction over permits for the growing aggregate mining industry that's creating pollution and environmental problems in the Texas Hill Country. TCEQ and other state regulatory agencies are deferential to the industries they are supposed to watch over, Walsh said.

We recommend Walsh for Texas Senate District 25.

Texas House 19

Political newcomer Baggett is best choice in newly-configured conservative district

New Texas House districts drawn by Republicans last year shifted District 19 in East Texas about 250 miles to the west near Austin, as mapmakers aimed to account for fast-growing population centers like Central Texas. The new District 19 includes solidly conservative Burnet, Blanco and Gillespie Counties, as well as Democratic-trending Kendall County and part of northwest Travis County.

It's a steep electoral hill for a left-leaning candidate to climb, but Johnson City Democrat Pam Baggett, a communications professional and former journalist, is a game challenger in a race against former Austin City Council Member Ellen Troxclair. Baggett's a political novice, but passionate about issues that matter, including fighting to restore voting and abortion rights in Texas, protecting public education dollars from private school vouchers, protecting Central Texas air and water from rapid development and accepting federal Medicaid dollars and expanding health care. Baggett said she would press the legislature to demand more aggressive enforcement from industry-friendly regulatory agencies, such as the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and Texas Railroad Commission.

"We've got some state agencies that need to be doing their job, what they were actually created to do," Baggett told our editorial board.

Baggett is on the right side of most major issues challenging Texas and we recommend District 19 voters elect her.

We recommended Troxclair in the District 19 Republican primary race because she demonstrated a moderate conservative political temperament during her one term on the Austin City Council, and had worked collegially with more liberal colleagues. But we were dismayed to hear Troxclair tell KVUE this month that "securing the border" is the biggest issue in this Central Texas race when there are clearly more pressing challenges confronting District 19. Troxclair's website says she wants to "stop leftist indoctrination and critical race theory in our schools." This is rhetoric ripped from former Donald Trump's MAGA playbook. The last thing the Texas Legislature needs is another far-right political grandstander.

Troxclair did not respond to our invitation to an endorsement interview.

Baggett is the best choice for voters in District 19.

Texas House 48

Howard, a Texas House veteran, has shown ability to work across the aisle and produce results

If state Rep. Donna Howard is unable to get everything she wants in the way of legislation in the Texas Legislature, she doesn't get discouraged and quit. Howard keeps working the angles, trying to find areas of potential compromise that many Republicans will accept. In doing so, Howard often emerges from legislative sessions with victories big and small for Texans.

"Bipartisan work is really the foundation of what I do," Howard told our editorial board. "I can't always be successful as a Democrat, but I feel like I have been able to beyond adequately represent my district, and want to have the opportunity to continue that work."

Howard has served District 48, which includes Westlake Hills, Rollingwood and Sunset Valley, since 2006. A former critical care nurse at Brackenridge and Seton hospitals, she is a member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee and one of the legislature's foremost experts on health care policy. In the last session she convinced the Legislature to mandate comprehensive reviews of care at Texas nursing homes and helped direct \$25 million in COVID relief funds to nursing education to help relieve a critical nursing shortage in the state. She's vowed to hold the Texas Public Utility Commission and ERCOT accountable for fixes to the state's vulnerable power grid in the next legislative session beginning in January.

Howard told our board that as a member of the appropriations committee, she is focused on budget requests at state agencies. She hopes to convince lawmakers to use part of a \$28 billion budget surplus to boost pay for critical employees, such as home health care attendants, teachers and criminal justice workers, who are leaving state employment for better pay in the private sector.

Libertarian Daniel McCarthy is also vying to represent District 48. Howard is an effective and respected legislator. We recommend her for re-election.

Texas House 50

Talarico's stellar legislative record warrants a third term, this time in a new district

During two terms representing District 52 in the Texas House, Democratic Rep. James Talarico has established himself as one of the legislature's brightest rising stars.

A champion of public education, juvenile justice and police reform, expanding Medicaid and other initiatives that would help millions of Texans, Talarico is an effective, hard-working legislator who has earned the admiration of Democrats and Republicans alike.

But last year the Republican-controlled legislature gerrymandered the Round Rock-based District 52 to make it nearly impossible for Talarico to retain that seat. In response, Talarico moved a few miles south to District 50 and won the Democratic primary in March, after former Rep. Celia Israel vacated the seat to run for mayor of Austin.

During his first term in the legislature, after the controversial killing of Javier Ambler by Williamson County police, Talarico partnered with criminal justice advocates to pass the Javier Ambler Act – banning police departments from contracting with reality TV programs. A diabetic, Talarico has also worked with Republicans to cap the price of insulin co-pays at \$25 per prescription. On the education front, he authored legislation signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott that limits the size of pre-K classes in Texas to 22 students. During an interview with our editorial board, he said he would focus on affordability by encouraging local governments to enact incentives for affordable development and improving mass transit.

"We have got to, as a community, figure out a way to ensure that Austin, and in particular, North Austin and the surrounding communities, are an affordable place to live for all families," Talarico said.

While we recommend that North Austin voters in House District 50 elect Talarico, we were also impressed by his opponent, Republican Victor Johnson, a career military and law enforcement professional and president of the Pflugerville Republican Club. Libertarian Ted Brown is also running for this seat.

Texas House 51

Longtime legislative advocate Flores can hit the ground running at the Capitol

A fixture at the Texas Capitol as an effective policy advocate over the past two decades, Austin lawyer Maria Luisa "Lulu" Flores is vying for the open House District 51 seat vacated by Democratic Rep. Eddie Rodriguez in Southeast Travis County.

She lost a previous campaign for the seat to Rodriguez in 2002, but ran again this year, fending off a half-dozen Democrats to win the primary. Rapidly gentrifying District 51 faces significant challenges and opportunities as Austin continues to grow, and its residents deserve a candidate of Flores' caliber. We recommend her over Republican candidate Robert Reynolds, who declined to meet with our board.

The former chief of staff to former state Rep. Irma Rangel and director of legislative programs for the State Bar of Texas, Flores was a national delegate for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and is a past president of the National Women's Political Caucus.

If elected, Flores said she would work to repeal Texas' new abortion restrictions, alleviate food insecurity for children and vote to expand Medicaid and access to the Child Health Insurance Program. She has vowed to make voting rights a priority, by supporting a ban on partisan intimidation at polling sites, ending voter purges and supporting online, same day, and automatic voter registration, and universal vote by mail.

Flores said she would work with Republicans to get results. Flores is a proven advocate who with her long-standing relationships in politics can hit the ground running in the Texas House.

Texas House 45

Zwiener's smart advocacy on multiple progressive fronts warrants reelection

During her first run for the Texas House in 2018, Democrat Erin Zwiener of Driftwood flipped control of the District 45 seat from red to blue, and in 2020 she fended off a strong push by the GOP to recapture it, eking out victory by just a percentage point.

That success speaks to Zwiener's hard work on the campaign trail and her bipartisan constituent service and effectiveness at the Texas Capitol. Zwiener faces a challenge from Michelle M. Lopez, a Republican former Kyle City Council member. We recommend voters re-elect Zwiener, who has established herself as a leader on environmental issues, launching and chairing the Texas Caucus on Climate, Environment, and the Energy Industry, and as a powerful voice in the progressive fight to protect voting and abortion rights.

If reelected, Zwiener told our board she'll continue to fight for environmental protections, especially as explosive growth threatens Hill Country land and water.

"Let's keep some of the community character intact, and grow in ways that add to that character, instead of just turn it into faceless sprawl," Zwiener said. "The outdoor world is incredibly important to the people in District 45, and we have challenges around protecting clean air and water."

Texans, especially residents of District 45, are better off with an advocate like Zwiener at the state Capitol.

Texas House 47

In seeking third term, Goodwin focuses on education, abortion rights and gun control

In two terms in the Texas House, Rep. Vikki Goodwin has worked to protect abortion and voting rights, boost pay for retired teachers and force Texas environmental regulators to beef up protections for communities threatened by industrial pollution.

An Austin-area realtor, Goodwin also backs expanding Medicaid, which Republicans have continually blocked though it would extend health care coverage to more than a million Texans and provide badly needed revenue to rural hospitals. If re-elected, she said she would press again for universal background checks on gun purchases, legislation she filed during the last session but was unable to convince the Republican-controlled legislature to pass.

Goodwin told our board she would introduce a bill in the 88th Legislature that would put abortion access on the ballot for Texas voters to decide, as Kansans did in August. That would require a two-thirds vote of both chambers of the Republican-controlled legislature -- no easy feat, but worth the effort.

Republican Rob McCarthy, a former tech manager and current distillery owner who moved from California to Austin in 2016, is also in the District 47 race. Goodwin has served this West Travis County district well. We recommend voters elect her to a third term in District 47.

Texas House 49

Hinojosa's leadership on education, voting rights and gun policy warrants another term

During three terms in the Texas House representing this Central Austin district, Democratic Rep. Gina Hinojosa has established herself as a leader in the effort to protect voting rights and abortion access, and in the push for gun safety reforms.

The lawyer and former member of the Austin Independent School Board has consistently fought to improve public education, including pushing legislation that would fund Texas schools based on enrollment.

"We're one of a handful of states that funds our schools based on attendance, which leaves money on the table and shortchanges our schools and our students," Hinojosa told our editorial board. If re-elected, she plans to keep pushing for this school funding change, and make a run for the chairmanship of the Texas House Democratic Caucus, a post that could give her more legislative influence.

Hinojosa also vows to push for gun safety restrictions. Hinojosa introduced the first bill to make it a felony to lie on a gun background check application in Texas, a policy that is now law in Texas. Hinojosa is optimistic that lawmakers may consider raising the minimum age to buy high-powered assault weapons to 21 and mandating that the records of juveniles involuntarily committed to a mental institution as minors be included in gun buyer background checks.

Hinojosa faces challenges from Republican Katherine Griffin and Libertarian David Roberson; neither can match her political experience or record in the legislature. We recommend voters elect Hinojosa to a fourth term representing House District 49.

Texas House 136

Bucy fights for progressive values, leads on voting rights, health care

When Texas Republicans introduced a package of voting restriction bills in the 87th Legislature, Democratic Rep.

John Bucy III fought back.

Bucy even convinced the GOP to approve some of his own amendments and bills, ultimately passing legislation that helped make it easier for disabled people to vote, allows voters to track their registration status, and improves voting data transparency. We were heartened to hear Bucy say he'll bring a similar effort to bear on abortion rights, Medicaid and health care expansion, gun safety measures that will protect Texans and improve their quality of life. We recommend voters in District 136 based in North Austin and Round Rock re-elect Bucy to a third term.

A small businessman and father of two young girls, Bucy says the state is not paying its fair share for public education and he would support increasing it to give local property taxpayers much needed relief. He criticized Gov. Greg Abbott's failed \$4 billion Operation Lone Star border initiative, saying the money would be much better spent elsewhere, such as education.

"The governor plays politics to kind of look tough and to spend money," Bucy told our editorial board.

"Unfortunately while he's playing political games, it's having tragic impacts on lives. This is money that can be used for our public schools, for school safety or therapists, or health care."

Bucy does his homework and sticks up for democratic values and principles. Republican Michelle Evans and Libertarian Burton Culley are challenging Bucy, but neither can match his legislative experience. Texas Monthly reported that Evans spread false rumors about Round Rock schools and co-founded the anti-vaccine political action committee Texans for Vaccine Choice. This kind of behavior has no place in state government.

Bucy is an effective and evenhanded advocate for District 136. We recommend voters re-elect him.

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Recap of Statesman 2022 election endorsements

November 6, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Voting is a bedrock principle of American democracy, and Texans on Tuesday have the opportunity to exercise that right and privilege by casting ballots in races for Congress, the state legislature, local city council and school board contests and more.

Austin voters will also decide on three bond proposals that, if approved, would finance billions of dollars worth of capital improvements for the city's public schools, and millions for the Austin Community College system and for affordable housing.

In addition to helping to select our elected officials, your vote helps affirm the importance of elections at a time when many are worried about the state of democracy in America. A CBS News poll in September showed that 72 percent of all Americans believe democracy and the rule of law are under threat. That's a sad commentary on the state of our national politics.

In Travis County, 31 percent of registered voters had already voted early as of Friday morning. In 2018, 47 percent of Travis County voters cast early ballots.

To find voting locations and sample ballots, visit votetravis.com (Travis County), wilco.org/elections (Williamson County), hayscountytexas.com/departments/elections (Hays County) or bastropvotes.org (Bastrop County).

Below is a recap of the Austin American-Statesman's recommendations in 35 political races and the three bond proposals. You can learn more about the candidates online at: statesman.com/opinion.

Texas Governor

Recommendation: Beto O'Rourke

Texas Lt. Governor

Recommendation: Mike Collier

Texas Attorney General

Recommendation: Rochelle Garza

Congress

Recommendations:

Rep. Michael McCaul for U.S. House District 10

Claudia Zapata for U.S. House District 21

Greg Casar for U.S. House District 35

Rep. Lloyd Doggett for U.S. House District 37

Legislature

Recommendations:

Sen. Sarah Eckhardt for Texas Senate 14

Sen. Judith Zaffirini for Texas Senate 21

Pam Baggett for Texas House 19

Robert Walsh for Texas Senate 25

Rep. Erin Zwiener for Texas House 45

Rep. Sheryl Cole for Texas House 46

Rep. Vikki Goodwin for Texas House 47

Rep. Donna Howard for Texas House 48

Rep. Gina Hinojosa for Texas House 49

Rep. James Talarico for Texas House 50

Maria Luisa "Lulu" Flores for Texas House 51

Rep. John Bucy III for Texas House 136

State offices

Recommendation: Susan Hays for Agriculture Commissioner

Recommendation: Janet T. Dudding for Comptroller

Recommendation: Jay Kleberg for Land Commissioner

Recommendation: Luke Warford for Railroad Commissioner

County Judge

Recommendation: County Judge Andy Brown

County Clerk

Recommendation: Dyana Limon-Mercado

Austin Mayor

Recommendation: Celia Israel

Austin City Council

Recommendations:

Council Member Natasha Harper-Madison for District 1

Jose Noe Elias for District 3

Ryan Alter for District 5

Council Member Paige Ellis for District 8

Ben Leffler for District 9

AISD school board

Recommendations:

Roxanne Evans for District 1

Kathryn Whitley Chu for District 4

Andrew Gonzales for District 6

Trustee Arati Singh for District 9

AISD bond proposal

Recommendation: FOR Proposition A

Recommendation: FOR Proposition B

Recommendation: FOR Proposition C

ACC bond proposal

Recommendation: FOR Proposition A

City of Austin bond proposal

Recommendation: FOR Proposition A

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Travis County aims to curb opioid deaths

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[OpenURL Link](#)

"Whatever you think about using drugs or not using drugs, I don't think anyone thinks drug use should be a death sentence."

County Judge Andy Brown

As fentanyl-related deaths climb in Travis County, county leaders on Monday announced they will partner with Austin nonprofits to equip about a dozen bars with a nasal spray that reduces the effects of an opioid overdose and provide the training required to use it.

"No one wants their house to catch on fire," said Phil Owen, a program manager with the Austin-based counseling group Communities for Recovery, who lost his son to a fentanyl overdose. "But if you do, you certainly want to have a fire extinguisher."

Additionally, the Travis County Commissioners Court is expected on Tuesday to approve a \$175,000 contract award to Communities for Recovery to hold weekly support groups for people recovering from drug addiction and to conduct outreach for its services in Travis County, said County Judge Andy Brown.

In October, Travis County and the city of Austin declared a public health crisis over the rise in drug overdose deaths they were witnessing. Travis County saw overdose deaths double in the first six months of 2022 compared with 2021, and more of those deaths were linked to fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine.

In the first half of the year, 113 people in Travis County died of fentanyl overdoses, and 199 people died of all overdoses. Last year in Travis County, a total of 118 people died from fentanyl.

"It looks like we're on a really horrible track," Brown said Monday.

Travis County is partnering with FBR Management, which manages several Austin-area bars, to distribute two doses each of Narcan, the brand name of naloxone. The medicine, in the form of a nasal spray given to 13 bars in the area, will reduce the effects of an opioid overdose. The county is also partnering with the nonprofit Safe Haven, which will teach the bartenders how to recognize an opioid overdose and how to use the spray.

The medicine can quickly restore normal breathing to a person if breathing has slowed or stopped because of an opioid overdose. The spray has no effect on those who do not have opioids in their system, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"We're more than happy to help," said Max Moreland, operations director with FBR. "But we also hope that today we can expand that knowledge and this information to more than just within our industry. ... In a perfect world, we'll never have to use this, but we'd like to be prepared."

The bars involved include Lavaca Street Bar, Dive Bar, Dumont's Down Low, Gibson Street Bar, Lala's Little Nugget, Mean Eyed Cat, Stagger Lee, Star Bar, the Wheel and Field House.

Bartenders are just a fraction of those equipped with Narcan in Travis County. Austin-Travis County EMS medics and Austin police have it, and the Austin school district received about 200 kits of Narcan in October from Austin Public

Health. Earlier this year, Austin Public Health secured 9,900 doses and provided them to the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, which distributed the doses for free to opioid users.

"This whole process is made more difficult by a state law that says that we as a county cannot pay an entity to distribute Narcan or naloxone, which makes no sense to me," Brown said. "Our hope is that the law will also change. ... It's just another roadblock that our, frankly, behind-the-times state statutes are throwing up. We're trying to figure out ways around that."

Additionally, Brown said he supports a bill that state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed this month to legalize fentanyl testing strips in the state. They are classified as drug paraphernalia, so it is illegal to possess or distribute them.

To use the strips, testers can dissolve a small amount of drug residue in water, then dip the test strip into the liquid to determine whether fentanyl is present.

"That will help save lives," Brown said. "Whatever you think about using drugs or not using drugs, I don't think anyone thinks drug use should be a death sentence. That's what we're talking about here is saving lives in our community and making it possible for people to save their own lives."

"Whatever you think about using drugs or not using drugs, I don't think anyone thinks drug use should be a death sentence."

County Judge Andy Brown

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Legislators have opportunity to undo abortion bans' damage

December 11, 2022 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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[OpenURL Link](#)

With bill filing underway in advance of the 88th Texas Legislature kicking off in January, we are keeping a close eye on what's being proposed for abortion access. As obstetrician-gynecologists practicing for more than two decades in Texas, we are deeply concerned about access to timely, medically necessary reproductive and gynecological care not just for our patients but for anyone needing them.

We are encouraged that some lawmakers are fast out of the gate to file bills adding exceptions for rape and incest to Texas' current abortion ban. We are also encouraged that there are bills filed to allow a pregnant patient and their doctor to make a decision about abortion care that considers lethal fetal anomalies and the preservation of the pregnant patient's physical or mental health. These are humane exceptions to what is a draconian ban on all abortions.

We are also heartened to see the joint resolution filed by Rep. James Talarico (D-Round Rock), which, if passed, would give the decision on abortion access in the state to the voters directly. HJR 56 would place language on the November 2023 ballot to prohibit the Texas Legislature from passing any laws "that abridge an individual's access to abortion care if the individual's decision to access abortion care is made in consultation with a licensed physician."

As physicians, our first rule is to do no harm. Adhering to that principle is increasingly difficult when lawmakers tie our hands and limit our ability to care for patients. Anyone performing an abortion from the moment of fertilization faces life in prison and civil penalties of no less than \$100,000 plus attorney's fees. While pregnant individuals themselves are protected from criminal prosecution, they can be subject to the state's vigilante law that incentivizes their fellow citizens to file state civil actions for minimum damages of \$10,000 against anyone suspected of aiding in an abortion.

Make no mistake, these broad bans impact all our patients. We see patients with lethal or life-limiting fetal diagnoses who have their choice to terminate the pregnancy taken away. We have patients in menopause who need medications for non-pregnancy, non-abortion-related procedures denied access to those medications because they are also used for abortions. These are heartbreaking and utterly unnecessary situations. In addition, in the days and weeks after the Supreme Court's *Dobbs vs. Jackson* ruling, we had exponentially more patients seeking permanent sterilization because they so fear an unplanned pregnancy.

Texas' overreaching bans are out of step with not only what our patients need but what voters want. Only 12 percent of Texas voters support a complete ban on abortion access, according to a University of Texas/Texas Politics Project poll from August 2022. Nearly 40 percent believe abortion should always be available as a matter of choice. Half of registered voters in October 2022 reported that the state's abortion laws should be less strict than they are now. This proportion has steadily increased from a low of 26% in June 2013 to this new high.

Voters in other states, including Kansas and Kentucky, have made their voices heard and told their lawmakers they don't want complete abortion bans. In August, Kansas voters rejected a ballot measure that would have removed protections for abortion rights from the state's constitution. Voters in Kentucky in the November election rejected an anti-abortion ballot measure that would have amended the state's constitution to say it does not protect a right to abortion.

It's time for Texas lawmakers to listen to the people their laws affect. Listen to the physicians. Listen to the patients. The complete ban on abortion results in cruel treatment of patients facing real health threats and has far-

reaching impact on access to reproductive and gynecological care far beyond the single abortion procedure.

Chapman and Handcock are obstetrician/gynecologists who own a private practice in Austin.

Your Turn

Dr. Amy Chapman and Dr. Tyler Handcock

Guest columnists

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What Austin-area Texas House lawmakers want to pass this year

January 8, 2023 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Niki Griswold; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 2166 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

For the 13 legislators representing Austin-area districts in the House, those priorities, and their strategies for getting them across the finish line, substantially differ based on political affiliation. While the eight Democrats cite investing in public education and Medicaid expansion as two of their top issues, the five Republicans point to lowering property taxes and increasing border security.

Lawmakers are returning to the Capitol on Tuesday for opening day of the 88th Legislature, starting the clock on the 140 days lawmakers have to pass new legislation every other year.

Though lawmakers are only constitutionally obligated to pass a biennial budget, the legislative priorities of the state's "Big Three" — Republicans Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and presumed-House Speaker Dade Phelan — will largely dictate the issues officials will address during the session and will play a role in shaping the political environment lawmakers have to navigate to accomplish their own legislative goals.

For the 13 legislators representing Austin-area districts in the House, those priorities, and their strategies for getting them across the finish line, substantially differ based on political affiliation. While the eight Democrats cite investing in public education and Medicaid expansion as two of their top issues, the five Republicans point to lowering property taxes and increasing border security.

The path to achieving those goals looks very different for each party. With 86 Republicans and 64 Democrats making up the 150-person Texas House, Republicans expanded their majority in the chamber by one seat in the 2022 elections, and Democrats remain dependent on reaching across the aisle to achieve their objectives.

"I've been in the Legislature since 2006, and have been a part of the minority party my entire time. The only way I get anything done is by working in a bipartisan fashion, and I will continue to do that," said Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, adding that she remains optimistic there is an appetite for bipartisan cooperation among members of both parties.

Phelan, who is expected to win reelection to a second term as speaker, has indicated he intends to continue appointing members of the minority party to committee chairmanships, despite calls from GOP conservatives to do away with that longtime tradition.

Nonetheless, with Republicans holding majorities in the House, Senate and all statewide offices, conservatives have a leg up in pushing through even the most divisive and controversial issues. In the last session, Republicans were able to pass a near-total abortion ban without exceptions for rape or incest, permitless carry of handguns and an elections overhaul bill that led to Democrats breaking quorum by fleeing to Washington, D.C., for over a month. The elections bill ultimately passed.

That effort remains on the mind of Austin-area Democratic lawmakers, who say that "playing defense" — such as killing bills with points of order, tacking amendments onto legislation, and threatening another quorum break — is an inevitable element of the minority party strategy.

"We'll see what happens this session, whether (Phelan) ... is going to take seriously that we have 64 members in the Texas House who work hard, have ideas, represent communities that have an interest in policies that we pass," said Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin. "We'll prepare to work with Republicans, but we also know that if we're not taken seriously or not respected in this process, that there's enough of us where we can make things hard in the House."

Already, Austin's Democratic delegation is preparing to push back against a wave of legislation filed by conservative representatives on LGBTQ issues.

"I'm a member of the House LGBTQ caucus. I know they're preparing for numerous attacks on transgender folks who want to participate in athletics, on transgender folks seeking medical care, on inclusive books in schools, on people who are LGBTQ even being able to discuss who they are within our schools," said Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood. "Those are all things we're very worried about, and we are preparing for the worst."

However, with the Legislature likely to have a budget surplus of more than \$27 billion, Democratic representatives hope lawmakers' focus will largely stay on the issues that have broad bipartisan support even if the parties disagree on how to accomplish those goals, such as investing in the state's infrastructure, public education system and addressing rising property taxes.

"I think there is absolutely room for bipartisan progress on these major issues that Texans face," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin.

His first session "was the kumbaya session where we came together to pass historic school finance reform," he said. "My second session was maybe the most partisan and unproductive in modern Texas history. So, I have, just in two terms, seen the Legislature at its best and the Legislature at its worst. So, I'm hoping this session is a lot more like 2019 and a lot less like 2021."

The American-Statesman conducted interviews with all eight Austin-area Texas House Democrats. Republican representatives-elect Ellen Troxclair of Austin, Caroline Harris of Round Rock, and Carrie Isaac of Dripping Springs declined interviews but sent written statements. Rep. Terry Wilson, R-Marble Falls, and Rep.-elect Stan Gerdes, R-Smithville, did not respond to requests for interviews or comment.

Democratic Rep.-elect Lulu Flores of Austin, and Republican Reps.-elect Gerdes, Troxclair, Harris and Isaac are freshmen members.

Here are some of the top issues of the Austin delegation to the House:

Public education

The top issue that Austin-area Democrats are focusing on is obtaining larger investments in public education. A primary proposal Democrats are floating is raising the basic allotment, or the amount of funding the state is required to give each school district per student.

"That will have a multitude of positive outcomes, including reducing property taxes, reducing recapture, it will also increase salaries to our teachers," Howard said. "House Bill 3 that we passed a couple of sessions back has a requirement in it that anytime we raise the basic allotment, that 30% of that has to go to raising salaries ... then it also just obviously expands the funding for schools and gives them more resources that they need to meet the needs of the students in our state."

Rep. John Bucy III, D-Austin, and several of his Democratic colleagues also have suggested changing the funding mechanism so that school districts receive money for each student enrolled, rather than having it based on daily attendance.

Public education funding is also a key area in which Democrats see the potential for bipartisan cooperation.

"My biggest allies often for our public schools are rural Republicans fighting against privatization of our schools, fighting for increased pay and respect for our teachers, and decreased reliability on standardized testing," said Hinojosa.

But Austin-area Republicans have indicated support for several education-related issues that are not likely to draw bipartisanship, including promoting charter schools and limiting how teachers can discuss race, racism, sex and sexism in the classroom.

"On the campaign trail, I promised my constituents I would be their conservative voice in Austin," said Troxclair, who previously served as a conservative Austin City Council member, in a statement to the Statesman. "My first three bills touch on three of my campaign promises: provide significant property tax relief, serve as a budget watchdog against frivolous government spending, and ensure our classrooms focus on learning — free of sexual content and political activism."

On the campaign trail last year, Harris and Isaac expressed support for charter schools, and opposition to the so-called critical race theory in the classroom.

Medicaid expansion, women's health

Austin-area Democrats are also staunchly in favor of expanding Medicaid in Texas.

"It's the single most important thing we can do to help the people of Texas overnight, it would help get coverage to over a million Texans," Bucy said.

With abortion now illegal in Texas, it's particularly important to Democrats to expand Medicaid coverage for new moms. In the 87th legislative session, the House voted to expand postpartum Medicaid coverage for new mothers for up to a year, but that was slashed to six months in the Senate. Democrats are focused on renewing that push for more coverage in the upcoming session, and hope to have support from across the aisle.

"I'm hoping that in light of the passage of the restrictions on access to abortion, which means we're going to have increases in births, that those who have pushed for eliminating abortions will rally with us to say, 'Let's make sure we get the money in place to support all these moms,' not only the moms that we currently have, but all the new moms we're going to have as a result of pregnancies that are going to be unplanned, who have no other option but to carry through with the pregnancy," Howard said.

Democrats are also hoping to mitigate some of the impacts of the state's abortion ban, and they have filed legislation to grant exceptions for rape and incest, and to clarify what kinds of medical interventions are legal.

"Women who are wanting their pregnancies but having medical complications, are finding that the physicians have hesitancy in intervening now because of the ambiguities in the law that are threatening their license and actually even threatening the potential for jail time depending on interpretation," Howard said. "I'm working with physicians, with OB-GYNs in particular, to have a bill that will hopefully clarify medical judgments that's required when patients present with medical complications."

Climate, energy, power grid

Despite lawmakers' efforts last legislative session to address the vulnerabilities in the state's power grid that surfaced during a historic winter storm in February 2021, Democrats say there is more to be done. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, a Republican from Houston who also serves as the Senate's chief, has also identified the power grid as a priority.

Howard said she'd like to use some of the state's budget surplus to invest in power transmission and to make the grid reliable, "whether that means building more generation units ... putting money into place to help with ensuring more efficiency of homes. Because part of the problem we know with 50% of the power users being residential, unless it's a very new home, most homes in Texas are not built with the insulation necessary to conserve energy, so we can invest in that."

Zwiener, who sits on the Climate, Environment and Energy Industry caucus, said she's hopeful that caucus will grow

in the upcoming session.

"I'm actually optimistic that we're going to really start building some bipartisan consensus toward investing in the innovative energy economy, which is something that can offer us lower carbon or even zero carbon or negative carbon options, while also keeping Texas a leader in the energy industry and providing us more diversity in our fuel streams, which quite frankly, makes our grid more reliable," she said.

Elections, voting rights

Improving the elections process by expanding access to the polls and protecting voting rights also remain priorities for Democrats.

"About 20 to 30 of my bills, by the time our portfolio is done, will be around election policy," Bucy said. "We'll be continuing the fight for online voter registration.

"We want to make sure we don't miss a beat in talking about why that is better for the people of Texas, why it's more accurate data and secure data and why most states do it — red or blue — because if you truly want transparent, secure elections, online voter registration is the way to go."

Zwiener hopes to get bipartisan support in her effort to set campaign contribution limits.

"Texas is one of a handful of states where you can literally give a state legislator \$1 million and that's perfectly legal," Zwiener said. "I don't think it makes a lick of sense, and I think most Texans would agree with me ... and quite frankly, that's also something that could work in favor of most of my GOP colleagues who don't want to be held hostage by whether or not the (wealthy political donors) Wilks brothers or Tim Dunn is going to run someone against them in the next primary and fully fund them.

"It puts more power in the hands of the people at large instead of in the hands of a few people with a whole lot of money."

Rep. Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin, said she's interested in allowing Texans to use ranked choice voting.

"I think that that can be a bipartisan issue," she said. "It saves money on these elections that have very low turnout, just like we saw in the Austin runoff for mayor and several of the City Council seats. That was an expensive election ... So it would be a money saver and you'd have higher turnout."

Other key issues

Republicans: Border security

Democrats: Defending local control

Bipartisan: Public safety

Bipartisan: School security

For the 13 legislators representing Austin-area districts in the House, those priorities, and their strategies for getting them across the finish line, substantially differ based on political affiliation. While the eight Democrats cite investing in public education and Medicaid expansion as two of their top issues, the five Republicans point to lowering property taxes and increasing border security.

TEXAS TEACHERS - Rep. Talarico proposes \$15,000 raise

January 25, 2023 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Keri Heath; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 548 Words

Page: A1

[OpenURL Link](#)

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, and a group of Democratic legislators are proposing a \$15,000 pay raise for Texas teachers and a 25% pay raise for other school employees using state surplus funds.

The lawmakers and Austin school district officials hope the legislation, if passed, will help retain teachers as more educators leave the profession for higher paying jobs, and encourage more school employees to live near the communities where they teach.

Talarico, flanked by Democratic legislators, teachers, Austin district trustees and other Austin-area education advocates, announced his bill during a news conference Tuesday at the Capitol.

"This moment demands bold action, and that's what our state is known for," Talarico said. "House Bill 1548 would be the biggest teacher pay raise in Texas history. In Texas, we go big or we go home. Let's go big on teacher pay."

Talarico's bill proposes the state use part of its \$32.7 billion surplus and other funding to give school districts a \$15,000 credit every year for each teacher, full-time librarian, counselor and nurse it employs. Districts would be required to use that money to pay those employees more, according to the legislation.

The bill also proposes a state-funded 25% pay increase for all other nonadministrative school employees, such as custodians or cafeteria staff. It also proposes the state-funded pay raises as an annual part of the budget.

If the bill is passed as proposed, it would raise minimum teacher pay in Texas from \$33,660 to \$48,660, Talarico said.

"Basic teacher pay is something we can do and something we must do," Talarico said. "I would say the most important job in the world is being a parent, but the second-most important job in the world is being a teacher. It's also the hardest."

The state needs to do something to encourage more teachers to stay in the profession, said Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin.

"We don't actually have a teacher shortage," Hinojosa said. "The teachers exist. The teachers are here and have chosen to walk away from a profession that undervalues them, that underpays them and underresources their job."

Hinojosa is one of the other lawmakers, including Reps. Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, and Terry Meza, D-Irving, who signed on to the legislation or plan to, Talarico said.

Austin school board President Arati Singh, who attended Tuesday's announcement, hopes the Legislature will approve Talarico's bill.

"This would mean the world to our district," Singh said. "Our students benefit, first of all, when we have qualified teachers in our classrooms."

The Austin district this month started its budgeting process for the 2023-24 school year, and trustees made it clear they want to prioritize raising teacher pay.

Austin district staff have proposed a minimum 5% raise for teachers, which would increase starting salaries from \$52,191 to \$54,801.

The district has lost about a third of its teachers in the last two years, an issue that has affected students and the remaining staff, Singh said.

Talarico said he recognized that the \$15,000 teacher pay jump proposal might be lowered during negotiations with Republicans and other lawmakers, he said, adding that his bill would help reduce property taxes — a signature priority for the state's GOP leadership — and he hopes that will create more bipartisan appetite for it.

"The best way to provide sustainable property tax relief is by investing in public schools," Talarico said.

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Texas budget - Surplus presents dilemma for GOP - Lawmakers will face pressure to spend \$32B

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"The biggest potential pitfall is the reluctance of many Republicans being on the record engaging in activity that could be characterized in a future Republican primary as being fiscally irresponsible."

Mark Jones

Rice University political science professor

How much money Texas spends from the more than \$50 billion in surplus revenues and other funds sitting around this legislative session might depend on if conservative lawmakers are willing to break character and loosen up the state's purse.

Long held as frugal when it comes to finances, Republicans are under pressure from Democrats to unleash a significant chunk of money for goods and services, proposals that in a normal year would be nonstarters. But, by doing so, Republicans risk being seen as imprudent, an unwelcome label for the next time they run for election.

"The biggest potential pitfall is the reluctance of many Republicans being on the record engaging in activity that could be characterized in a future Republican primary as being fiscally irresponsible," said Mark Jones, a Rice University political science professor. "Your opponent has an easy campaign ad."

Spending decisions are shaping up to be the biggest challenge this session, as lawmakers balance unprecedented economic success against the unknowns of future budgets. Earlier this month, state Comptroller Glenn Hegar announced the state's budget surplus stood at an estimated \$32.7 billion, a breathtaking number reflective of the state's bustling economy and the increased inflationary product costs that are driving up sales tax revenue. Staggering on its own, that figure does not include an additional \$14 billion available in the state's rainy day fund, an account that is estimated to nearly double to \$27 billion by the end of the biennium in 2025.

What's more, Texas is still holding onto \$4 billion in federal pandemic relief funds.

In figuring out what to do with the money, Republican leaders to this point have prioritized homeowners. Last week, the Texas House and the Senate released preliminary budget proposals that each included \$15 billion in property tax relief, implementing a call from Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick to increase the homestead exemption from \$40,000 to \$70,000. Gov. Greg Abbott called it "a good start" but said he will push for more.

Meanwhile, Democrats are emphasizing one-time infrastructure expenditures for roads, water, the electric grid and rural broadband internet access. They also are exploring investments in education.

In proposing a \$15,000 salary increase for school teachers, Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, challenged conservatives to put the budget surplus to use.

"Hoarding this surplus while educators and children are suffering is immoral, and it's also bad business," Talarico said. "Any business person worth their salt will tell you that you don't stick your money under your mattress. You put your money to work by making smart investments."

Talarico said the cost for the raises would come out to less than half of the total budget surplus.

In total, the state has \$188 billion available to spend over the next biennium. Yet, under a constitutional spending limit, it can spend only \$134 billion. Including the \$4 billion in federal money that was not allocated in the House and Senate budget proposals, lawmakers are prepared to leave \$50 billion untouched without exercising some creative accounting or voting in favor to exceed the spending limit.

The only time the state has exceeded its spending limit was in 2007, and it was done to lower property taxes. Doing so is seen as politically risky, and Patrick, who heads the Senate, says he is opposed to it.

Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, who was a rookie lawmaker when the state busted the spending cap about 16 years ago, said that, because the money was returned to homeowners through tax relief, the vote was not viewed as controversial.

"It seems that the same narrative should apply now," Howard said. "I'm not sure if that's good enough for some of my colleagues, but it did provide necessary cover for my colleagues back in 2007. I think it could possibly be used now as well."

Howard, who served last session on the House Appropriations Committee, says tax relief from the surplus should include additional Texans, like business owners and rental property owners, and not just homeowners who have a homestead exemption.

"That doesn't guarantee renters will get a break, but it brings in a larger proportion of Texans," she said.

Jones, the political science professor, suspects lawmakers might circumvent the spending cap by establishing endowments for students pursuing high-demand careers like nursing or law enforcement.

"I would expect them to do that before they vote to bust the spending cap," he said.

Daniel Sánchez-Piñol, an economist with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, said the foundation opposes exceeding spending limits for infrastructure improvements, believing instead that money should come from the federal government, not the state. But the foundation would be fine with busting the cap for property tax relief, Sánchez-Piñol said.

"You're not spending. You're giving those resources back to the taxpayer," he said.

But Dale Craymer, president of the Texas Taxpayers and Research Association, suspects lawmakers might instead choose a workaround to unlock some of the money.

Whereas a reduction for most state taxes would not count against the spending limit, a reduction in property taxes, which are local and go to schools, would count. As such, the \$15 billion property tax cut proposed by both the House and the Senate is classified as an expense, no different than money spent for parks, public safety or border security.

So, rather than include property tax relief in the budget as an expense, lawmakers could vote to make it a constitutional amendment, and, if approved by Texas voters, the money would not count against the spending cap.

A constitutional amendment requires two-thirds votes in both chambers before it goes to Texas voters. Republicans fall short of that percentage on their own, and would need some Democratic support to pass the amendment. Democrats might be willing to go along in exchange for getting money for their priorities, Craymer said.

"Realistically, that does give Democrats the ability to bring forward some of the items they want considered as well," Craymer said.

"The biggest potential pitfall is the reluctance of many Republicans being on the record engaging in activity that

could be characterized in a future Republican primary as being fiscally irresponsible."

Mark Jones

Rice University political science professor

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Letters to the Editor - Private schools with voucher programs lack accountability, open government

January 29, 2023 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Page: A15

[OpenURL Link](#)

Re: Jan. 22 commentary, "School voucher program would weaken public education."

David DeMatthews' Jan. 22 commentary does an excellent job of identifying the failings of school vouchers. However, missing is another deleterious characteristic of vouchers: a lack of accountability and open government.

Public schools are held to academic accountability standards as determined by STAAR exams and other measures. Low-performing public schools are identified and subject to sanctions. Yet private schools that enroll publicly funded voucher students do not participate in the state's accountability system, leaving uncertain the worth of these taxpayer funds.

Another hallmark of public schools is that they must adhere to the regulations of open government, including conducting open meetings and responding to open records requests. No such laws apply to private schools.

Public funds demand public scrutiny; vouchers are a clear violation of this critical principle. We can promote "choice" by intra- and inter-district transfers, magnet schools, charter schools and need-based scholarships awarded by private schools.

James (Kal) Kallison, Austin

Spending budget surplus on one-time capital projects would save millions

While tempting to spend the state's surplus money on normal general fund type expenditures, it is not a sound financial plan. It is more appropriate to use these available funds for one-time capital projects.

Paying for capital projects in this manner means less bonded debt need be issued with long-term interest cost, which saves Texas taxpayers millions of dollars.

Some suggested one-time capital cost projects which the legislature should consider include adding new or expanded water retention projects, constructing power transmission lines from West Texas and finally installing air conditioning in state prisons with none.

Jim Brooks, Austin

Supreme Court rulings on guns and abortion create mayhem, ruin lives

Thank you, U.S. Supreme Court, for your rulings over the years interpreting the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, thereby inflicting a culture of gun violence and mass shootings on us citizens.

You couldn't tell the difference between a "well-regulated militia" and a bunch of crazies with modern weapons. You allowed the country to be overrun with guns so that anyone can get their hands on one or more and create mayhem, ruining the lives of thousands.

Oh, and by the way, thanks for the recent abortion ruling, thereby creating more mayhem and ruined lives.

Eugene Czora, Cedar Creek

Missing the days when politicians were held accountable for their lies

Reading about Rep. George Santos, I find myself remembering Lena Guerrero. After serving as a state representative, she went on to become the first woman and the first Hispanic to head the Texas Railroad Commission.

When running for re-election, it was discovered that she had falsely stated she had graduated from the University of Texas when she had been a few hours short. This lie ruined her political career.

Now someone like Rep. Santos can lie about dozens of accomplishments on his resume, including a degree from a college he never attended, his personal and family history, and yet he brazenly continues in his job as even some within his own party call on him to resign.

I miss the days when our politicians were more honorable and were held accountable for their lies.

Sara Stevenson, Austin

If history is an indicator, pay raise for teachers doesn't stand a chance

Re: Jan. 25 article, "Rep. James Talarico proposes \$15,000 raises for Texas teachers."

Hats off and kudos to Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, for his bill proposing a raise for Texas public schoolteachers.

Sadly, history tells us that this bill is already dead. Abbott and Patrick will make sure that it is in the trash can quickly.

Even with the surplus of money, a pay raise this size will never pass with legislators who view Texas public schoolteachers as a huge tax liability. Former State Board of Education member Cynthia Dunbar referred to public schools as "subtly deceptive tools of perversion." We certainly don't want to give those individuals more money.

Tip Giles, Austin

We have become desensitized to the gun violence and saturated coverage

On Jan. 22 we learned about another mass shooting. This time 10 people were killed and 10 more were injured at a dance studio in California. The shocking fact is that this was the 39th mass shooting in 2023 as of Jan. 24, according to CNN.

We must ask: Why is the government not enacting more stringent, yet reasonable gun laws? Perhaps part of the reason is that the public has become desensitized to the constant streaming of violence.

As scholars in communication have documented, when exposed to inordinate amounts of pictures and words detailing alarming events, the natural tendency is to assume these events are routine, normal — and expected. Hence, there may be less of the kind of emotional response needed to motivate citizens to pressure their leaders to adopt policies to alleviate the problem. I fear that is what we are witnessing with recent mass gun shootings and the media's saturated coverage.

Richard Cherwitz, Austin

Editor's note: The death toll from the Monterey Park mass shooting rose to 11 on Monday after one of the injured died.

How to submit a letter

Send letters of no more than 150 words by noon Thursday by using our online form at <https://bit.ly/3Crmkcf> or send an email to letters@statesman.com.

We welcome your letters on all topics. Include your name and city of residence; we do not publish anonymous letters.

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Domestic violence bill honors slain student - Seeks to empower victims to seek help

February 21, 2023 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

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Page: B1

[OpenURL Link](#)

In honor of an Austin woman who, according to police, was murdered in 2021 by a man who had threatened her a week earlier, state Rep. Vikki Goodwin has filed a bill to strengthen domestic violence prevention and empower victims to seek help.

Goodwin, D-Austin, on Feb. 13 introduced House Bill 2229, named the Natalia Cox Act, which would require police officers and medical professionals to provide a written list of resources and legal options available to individuals experiencing family or dating violence, such as how to file criminal charges, obtain an emergency protective order and break a lease to move somewhere safer.

"My heart goes out to (Cox), her parents, and her family and friends, who were devastated by something that seems preventable," Goodwin said. "We took a lot of time trying to brainstorm about ways that we could ensure other women didn't end up in the same situation."

A week before she was slain, the 21-year-old Huston-Tillotson University student had reported to police that a man with whom she had gone on two dates had threatened her with a gun, according to a police affidavit. No arrest was made based on that report, according to KVUE.

"We know that going from threat stage to acting stage can be a very short period of time and can be lethal," said Heather Bellino, the CEO of Texas Advocacy Project, a group of attorneys, staff members and volunteers formed in 1982 to help end dating and domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking.

Texas has an effective system in place to keep victims of domestic violence safe, but it has to start with an arrest, Bellino said. An arrest isn't necessary to get an emergency protective order, but without an arrest, victims do not get the same protections as they navigate the justice system, she said.

"Anytime people are threatened, we need to take this seriously," Bellino said.

The Natalia Cox Act places the Health and Human Services Department in charge of developing the written list of resources to be distributed by police and health care professionals.

"We want to make sure that women have the information that they need to keep themselves safe," Goodwin said.

"Anything that shores up a victim's ability to access resources sooner can't be a bad thing," Bellino said.

The Natalia Cox Act is one of several bills addressing protections for individuals in violent dating and family situations.

Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, introduced a bill to provide inclusive shelters with trauma-informed services for families and people affected by domestic violence.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, has proposed a bill to prevent employers from penalizing workers who experience domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking for taking time off to deal with related legal matters, such as filing a restraining order. Talarico's bill also requires employers to provide "reasonable accommodations," such as a modified schedule or job site change for employees' safety.

Rep. Victoria Neave Criado, D-Dallas, filed a bill to provide applicants for protective orders with an online hearing option.

"Virtual protective order hearings is a really big deal," Bellino said. "A victim is much safer if they can do these hearings virtually."

The COVID-19 pandemic showed protective order hearings could take place virtually and minimize opportunities for abusers to exert power and control over victims, Bellino said, adding that protective orders are proven to reduce violence.

"It's all about harm prevention," Goodwin said. "I filed the Natalia Cox Act to ensure women who have been threatened, abused or assaulted know that there are resources available to them so that they can protect themselves."

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PROTESTERS AT CAPITOLGUN SAFETY - 'DO SOMETHING' - Hundreds rally to demand legislation

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Author: Niki Griswold; Austin American-Statesman | USA TODAY NETWORK | Section: News | 1488 Words

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"On May 24, everything changed. ... He shot at my door, and a bullet went over my head. I remember hearing my best friends scream. ... I had to wait there for 77 minutes."

Caitlyne Gonzales

Robb Elementary shooting survivor

Hundreds of protesters from across Texas joined the families of Uvalde and Santa Fe school shooting victims to rally at the state Capitol on Tuesday to demand state lawmakers pass gun safety legislation.

Led by advocacy groups Moms Demand Action, Texas Gun Sense, Everytown for Gun Safety, and League of United Latin American Citizens, representatives and members of nearly 30 different organizations participated in the protest, which began at First Baptist Church in Austin before the hundreds of participants marched to the south steps of the Capitol.

Parents, siblings and other relatives of the 19 fourth graders and two teachers killed in the May 24 mass shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, led the march, holding posters and wearing shirts depicting their lost loved ones. Many have spent the months since the shooting advocating for lawmakers in Washington and Austin to implement gun control measures, including raising the minimum age to purchase AR-15-style, semi-automatic rifles from 18 to 21.

The Uvalde gunman had legally purchased the weapons he used in the deadliest school shooting in Texas history just days after his 18th birthday.

Several speakers addressed the crowd Tuesday, including state Sens. Roland Gutierrez, D-San Antonio, and Sarah Eckhardt, D-Austin, but perhaps the most compelling testimony came from 10-year-old Robb Elementary shooting survivor Caitlyne Gonzales.

Caitlyne's voice shook with emotion as she described her experience that day.

"On May 24, everything changed. I was at my award ceremony that day, earlier, before the shooting. As soon as we got to our class we heard the gunshots," Caitlyne said before breaking down in tears, as several protesters wiped their own tears from their faces.

"He wobbled my door knob; he banged on my door. He shot at my door, and a bullet went over my head. I remember hearing my best friends scream," Caitlyne said, crying. "Greg Abbott has done nothing to protect me or my friends. I had to wait there for 77 minutes. And then I heard the glass break; I had to run to the funeral home, barefoot with no shoes on."

Caitlyne's mother told her the following day that two of her best friends, Jackie Cazares and Eliahna Torres, had died in the shooting.

"I shouldn't have to be here, but I am because my friends don't have a voice no more," Caitlyne said.

Arnulfo Reyes, a teacher who was shot multiple times on May 24, also addressed the crowd. All 11 students in

Reyes' class — Room 111 — were killed, and Reyes nearly died lying on the floor of his classroom for more than an hour waiting for help.

"It has been nine months and four days since the massacre occurred at Robb Elementary, and to most of us it feels as if it happened yesterday," he said. "I come here today to let the governor know that expanding guns into schools will not make it safer.

"In a survey by the Texas American Federation of Teachers, it says that 77% of Texas school employees do not want to be armed on campus or to be expected to intercept a gunman. There were 376 armed men standing outside Robb Elementary that day and not a single one wanted to go intercept the gunman. What makes you think that a teacher would?"

Reyes advocated for raising the age to purchase firearms from 18 to 21.

"My hope would be that common sense gun laws be established that save children's lives, and no one has to live through a tragedy that causes so much pain and trauma," he said. "We lost 21 beautiful souls that day. The urgency for you to support common sense gun laws is vital for our school system, our children and our future.

"I implore you to stand with me and be the voice for those whose voices were robbed from them. Help me be the voice of change."

Christina Delgado, a member of Texas Gun Sense whose friend Rosie Stone lost her son in the Santa Fe high school shooting in 2018, slammed lawmakers for not taking action on gun restrictions sooner.

"We were promised that we would be the last; we were promised that there would be change," Delgado told the crowd. "We are here to demand change that was due five years ago. We need this body to take their thoughts and prayers and put them into action so no other parent, no other child should have to join us here in this battle because their children died from gun violence."

Eckhardt, the senator from Austin, listed additional gun restrictions she wants to see the Legislature pass, and also criticized Republicans who passed a law legalizing the permitless carry of handguns in the last legislative session.

"For too long, lawmakers have left gun violence unaddressed and, worse, they've made it easier for gun violence to occur in our state," Eckhardt said. "It's troubling to think that the thing that bonds so many of the organizers and advocates in this space here today is that they've lost a loved one to gun violence. It is long past time for us to raise the age to 21 to obtain a gun, to implement red flag protective orders, to create more protections, to balance the right to bear arms with the right to be safe in our homes, in our schools and in our churches."

Gutierrez, whose Senate district includes Uvalde, slammed Abbott for refusing to pass gun safety measures despite the mass shootings in El Paso, Sutherland Springs, Midland-Odessa, Santa Fe and Uvalde.

Gutierrez has filed several bills seeking justice and accountability for the Uvalde victims' families, as well as some to improve mass shooting protocols for law enforcement, and others for gun safety.

"We're here to tell this governor and beg this governor and others like him to do something — do something to avoid the killing of our children, do something to make it harder for an 18-year-old to access an AR-15 just as easy as he can access a Slurpee at 7-11," Gutierrez said.

Abbott has said he believes raising the age to purchase a military-style, semi-automatic rifle is unconstitutional, but Gutierrez pointed out that in Republican-controlled Florida, lawmakers passed a similar measure after the Parkland school mass shooting.

"It took Rick Scott, a Republican — a pretty conservative Republican in Florida — it took him 23 days to do the right thing," Gutierrez said. Abbott "can't do the bare minimum to help our children time and time and massacre after

massacre. How many more kids have to die? What has to happen? How many mothers and fathers need to bury their children?"

House Committee on Public Education discusses school safety

During the Texas House Committee on Public Education's first meeting Tuesday, members called for a need to increase mental health and safety resources in public schools.

Nationwide, mental health resources are limited, said Kathy Martinez-Prather, director of Texas State University's Texas School Safety Center.

"We are seeing an increase in mental health needs," Martinez-Prather said. "There isn't enough services there to meet the demands. That student that needs that help can't get that help for two months from now."

Rep. Matt Schaefer, R-Tyler, said: "Most, if not all, people who commit mass shootings have been men, so lawmakers should be incentivizing schools to create groups where young men can find purpose and community. If we're going to talk about school shootings, we need to talk about young men who are isolated, who are drifting."

The committee also discussed implementing additional requirements for physical security infrastructure, such as locks and doors.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, insisted that while the Public Education Committee isn't tasked with talking about guns, the topic can't be separated from school safety.

"If we responded to Pearl Harbor by just trying to build more boats that were harder to sink, that wouldn't have been addressing the whole threat," Talarico said.

During safety audits of about 2,800 campuses statewide between September and December, about 28% required adjustments and 5% failed to stop a pretend intruder from entering the building, Martinez-Prather said.

American-Statesman K-12 public education reporter Keri Heath contributed to this story.

"On May 24, everything changed. ... He shot at my door, and a bullet went over my head. I remember hearing my best friends scream. ... I had to wait there for 77 minutes."

Caitlyne Gonzales

Robb Elementary shooting survivor

More inside

Uvalde school district quietly fires officers without review. 4B

Texas Legislature - Bill would ban some books in schools - House Public Education panel holds hearing

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"Our definition has got to be airtight so it doesn't include classic books. Are you evaluating something like the Bible, something like 'Lonesome Dove' as a whole, rather than taking it out of context."

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin

A Texas House proposal to ban books with sexual content from school libraries drew dozens of supporters and opponents to the Capitol with some arguing the material is harmful for children and others claiming the measure could become a catchall to ban a variety of books.

The House Public Education committee held a hearing Tuesday for House Bill 900, by Rep. Jared Patterson, R-Frisco, which seeks to ban all sexually explicit materials from school libraries and restrict sexually relevant materials to only students with parental consent.

"You can deal with themes and you can deal with sex and not have it be sexually explicit," Patterson said.

He said books that have been found in Texas school libraries with sexually explicit content include "Perks of Being a Wallflower," "Damsel" and "Gender Queer."

"This is not a 'Fahrenheit 451'-style book ban," said Patterson, referencing the dystopian Ray Bradbury novel in which books are outlawed. "This is not a fight about silencing minority voices."

Committee members on Tuesday spent significant time trying to agree on a definition for what sexually explicit material means.

In a back-and-forth that lasted about an hour, Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, questioned the clarity of the bill's language, which defines sexually explicit material based on definitions for obscene material in the Texas Penal Code.

"Our definition has got to be airtight so it doesn't include classic books," Talarico said. "Are you evaluating something like the Bible, something like 'Lonesome Dove' as a whole, rather than taking it out of context."

Talarico brought in a copy of "Lonesome Dove," a classic Texas novel by Larry McMurtry. Patterson, who admitted during the hearing to not having read "Lonesome Dove," tweeted a screenshot late Tuesday night of the book's purchase on Amazon.

The bill also would put the onus on publishing companies that sell books to school districts to label sexually explicit material and gives authority to the Texas Education Agency to review books.

Patterson's proposal comes after some parents sparked outrage during the COVID-19 pandemic about sexual content found in books in school libraries. Parents across the state visited school board meetings to demand books, such as "Call Me Max" and "None of the Above," that they deemed inappropriate for students be removed from libraries.

In response, some districts set up book review processes and others removed certain books.

In Texas, 22 school districts have collectively banned more than 800 books, more than districts in any other state, according to PEN America, a New York-based nonprofit that defends expression through literature.

For hours Tuesday, proponents and opponents of Patterson's proposal testified to the committee on why it should approve or deny HB 900.

Kelly Neidert, executive director of Protect Texas Kids, a nonprofit that bills itself as a children's defender from progressive policies indoctrination, said this bill is necessary because school districts aren't going to remove books on their own.

"These books are very real," Neidert said. "All of these books have been found and are currently in school libraries in Texas. They're very shocking, and this is a real problem."

Those who testified against the bill argued it could hinder students' access to information or limit materials with LGBTQ characters.

While some forms of literature don't belong in school libraries, this bill could go too far, said Daniel Dawer with Educators in Solidarity, an Austin-based group that advocates against racism in education.

"Any attempt to remove books from school libraries represent attacks on school librarians and children's ability to read," Dawer said. "Exactly what constitutes sexually explicit material is extremely ambiguous in this bill."

Several committee members tried to ask those testifying to draw the line between what should be allowed in public schools and what shouldn't.

"I do not care if it costs schools a few bucks to do it," said Rep. Brian Harrison, R-Midlothian. "I want this filth out of my children's schools."

The House Education committee did not take action on the bill Tuesday and a date for further action hasn't been set.

"Our definition has got to be airtight so it doesn't include classic books. Are you evaluating something like the Bible, something like 'Lonesome Dove' as a whole, rather than taking it out of context."

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin

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TEXAS LEGISLATURE - House approves \$302B budget - Spending plan prohibits funding for private school tuition

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"I think it's a strong message. The House spoke in a bipartisan manner that they don't want public dollars going to ESAs and these other things."

Rep. Amando Walle

D-Houston, one of three co-authors to Rep. Abel Herrero's amendment

"This process with this amendment turns things in the wrong direction. It is the proverbial cart before the horse."

Rep. Brad Buckley

R-Killeen, House Public Education Committee chair

"School choice" plans suffered a major setback Thursday when the Texas House approved its state budget proposal with an amendment prohibiting using state money on private school tuition, jeopardizing Gov. Greg Abbott's push to establish a school voucher system through education savings accounts.

More than 20 Republicans joined nearly all House Democrats in approving the amendment, which passed 86-52, with 11 lawmakers registering as present but not voting, including House Public Education Committee Chair Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, as well as the former committee chair, Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston.

The House's rejection of using tax dollars to subsidize private school tuition was one of the most closely watched moments of the marathon 10-hour debate before the House voted 136-10 to pass its proposal for how to spend more than \$302 billion, including nearly \$137 billion in state general revenue, over the next two years. Eight Democrats and two Republicans voted against the measure.

The House's version of the budget includes \$17.3 billion in property tax relief, \$4.6 billion for border security, \$1.8 billion for a 5% raise for all state employees, \$60.3 billion for public schools, and provides for a freeze on state college tuition costs for the 2024-25 biennium.

"This budget is easily the largest increase in state funding of the foundation school program in Texas history," said state Rep. Greg Bonnen, R-Friendswood, who chairs the budget-writing House Appropriations Committee.

The House's budget, which will advance to the Senate where it'll likely face revisions, is the only legislation Texas lawmakers are required to pass in any regular session, as per the state's constitution. The House debate was colored in no small part by the whopping \$33 billion surplus.

Republican budget writers boasted of providing record sums for public schools and highway construction, and for across-the-board raises for state employees. Democrats pushed, generally unsuccessfully, for more generous outlays for teacher pay and for retired educators.

Texas House rejects school vouchers, education savings accounts

Rep. Abel Herrero, D-Robstown, called his proposal to block state money from being used for school vouchers or

education savings accounts "a simple amendment."

"This amendment prohibits the use of appropriated money for school vouchers or other similar programs meaning the monies appropriated by the state will be for our public, primary and public secondary education," he said. "Public money for public schools."

The amendment was largely seen as a rebuke to Abbott's monthslong effort to rally support for his legislative priority he calls "school choice" that would provide state support for something other than traditional public schools.

Such efforts have stalled in the past because of the near-united opposition from Democrats and rural Republicans who argue the measure would devastate public schools.

Several Republicans sought to rally votes to defeat Herrero's amendment, but the fight was uphill. Buckley, the education committee chair, asked the House to table the amendment because he didn't think the budget was the place for such a discussion and he wanted the debate to play out in committee where the public would be able to provide input.

"This process with this amendment turns things in the wrong direction," Buckley said. "It is the proverbial cart before the horse." The motion to table the proposal ultimately failed.

"I don't think there's anyone in this body that does not love our public schools," Buckley said. "But I have tremendous faith in this body at a time when our kids have suffered through a pandemic, when we've seen learning loss, we've seen families torn apart by disease, and we've seen families torn apart by economic disruption, and our kids are behind."

Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls, said the school choice initiatives would hardly spell the end to the state's public education system.

"The vast majority of kids in Texas will always go to public schools, and I want them to thrive," Frank said. "The future of our state depends on it. But no matter how good the school is in your district ... every child has different needs. And parents should have available options."

Rep. Amando Walle, D-Houston, who is one of three co-authors to Herrero's amendment, said the lopsided vote demonstrates the uphill battle school choice advocates are facing as the session heads into its final seven weeks.

"I think it's a strong message," Walle told the American-Statesman. "The House spoke in a bipartisan manner that they don't want public dollars going to ESAs and these other things."

"Today was a win, and we celebrate for our public schools. It's a victory, but we have to stay vigilant."

Frank, who has a school choice bill scheduled for a hearing in the House Education Committee next week, said in an interview that it's premature to declare the matter dead this session.

"The governor is very much for it; the majority of Republicans are for it," he said, referring to the concept and not his particular bill. "So, we'll see. What happened on the floor was a vote on an amendment to the House budget. Nothing more."

"No school can be all things to all people no matter how good your school district is. We can do multiple things at once. We can be 'improve public school', 'pro-charter school' and even possibly consider being 'pro ESAs.'"

Some amendments adopted, most not considered

More than half of the nearly 400 pre-filed amendments were pulled from consideration throughout the day and not brought up for debate in the chamber. While those amendments could possibly be considered later in the session

when the House and Senate meet to reconcile their two versions of the 2024-25 budget, their inclusion in the final budget is not likely.

Among the amendments that did come up for debate Thursday was a proposal to increase funding for the Republican-backed Alternatives to Abortion program. Authored by Rep. Cody Vasut, R-Angleton, the amendment would increase funding for the program by an additional \$40 million per fiscal year, on top of the \$60 million per fiscal year already allocated in the budget, for a total \$200 million in the upcoming biennium.

While Republicans claimed the extra funding is necessary to help the program meet an increased demand for services since abortion became almost entirely illegal in Texas, the amendment faced resistance from House Democrats who argued the program lacks accountability and oversight. The faceoff led to the first record vote of the day and passed 88-59, with a handful of Democrats voting with Republicans to adopt the amendment.

Republicans shot down an amendment that sought to strike language from the budget that would prohibit state funding for "unconstitutional" diversity, equity and inclusion programs and practices in colleges and universities. The amendment's author, Rep. Victoria Neave Criado, D-Dallas, spoke emphatically in favor of it, backed by a show of support from the Democratic caucus.

"We can vote to defund public colleges that honor the diversity of our communities. ... But we are better than that; this chamber is better than that," Neave Criado said. "Texas is strongest when our institutions of higher education reflect the makeup of our public schools. Texas businesses enjoy peak innovation when creativity and diversity flourish."

The amendment ultimately failed in an 83-64 vote.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, also offered an amendment to pay the fired employees from the Texas attorney general's office who filed a whistleblower lawsuit against Ken Paxton a settlement total of \$153,749. The money would have been taken directly from Paxton's salary, leaving him with an annual paycheck of just \$1 in 2025.

That amendment, however, was never brought to the floor for consideration.

"After lots of conversations, I don't have the vote on the floor today," Talarico said. "But I'm hoping to continue the conversation in conference" committee.

The GOP-led House also rejected an effort by Democratic leader Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio to lower the amount available for property tax cuts and instead use the money to boost teachers' pay by \$10,000 annually.

"We can make a statement for our teachers. We can leave money in the kitty for property tax cuts," Martinez Fischer said.

Republican budget managers pushed back against the proposal, saying the spending plan already boosts money for public schools above what is being currently spent. They said about 70,000 teachers should see about a \$3,800 annual salary bump.

"I just want to be clear with the facts here that this is a historic amount of funding we're putting into public education," said Rep. Trent Ashby, R-Lufkin. "What I'm saying is we're doing both: We're taking care of our public teachers, and we're providing the tax cuts that our taxpayers are demanding."

Martinez Fischer's proposal was shot down on a mostly party-line vote.

Several other Democratic-led initiatives to add money for local school districts and provide a funding boost for retired teachers met similar fates.

The only House representative who was absent for the entirety of Thursday's proceedings was Rep. Bryan Slaton,

R-Royse City, though the reason for his absence was unclear.

The House also adopted a \$14 billion supplemental appropriation to cover unexpected spending in the 2022-23 budget cycle, which ends Aug. 31.

No audit for Operation Lone Star

An amendment to audit border security spending in Abbott's controversial Operation Lone Star program, which is proposed to receive \$4.6 billion in the next biennium, was pulled from consideration.

Immigration watchdogs have criticized the spending as wasteful, pointing to a rise in illegal border crossings and deaths from drug overdoses in the two years since Abbott began deploying additional state resources to the border.

The proposed audit came via an amendment from Rep. Ryan Guillen, a Republican whose South Texas district abuts the Texas-Mexico border. It sought to audit the "efficiency and effectiveness" of the border security strategy and identify any duplication or overlap between state programs.

The \$4.6 billion, which mirrors the Senate's budget allocation for the initiative, represents a 6% increase. It slightly exceeds Austin's citywide budget for 2022, when the city's population was around 1 million.

Abbott has defended the spending as necessary to stop Mexican drug cartels and to deter migrants from flocking to the country, which he says is overwhelming small border towns with limited resources. He has strongly criticized President Joe Biden, whose border policies, he says, invite illegal crossings.

Although 13 state agencies receive money for border security, Guillen requested to audit six: public safety, military, emergency management, parks and wildlife, criminal justice and court administration.

American-Statesman chief political reporter Ryan Autullo contributed to this report.

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TEXAS LEGISLATURE EDUCATION BILLS - Public comment runs for 12 hours in House - Savings accounts, vouchers mulled

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[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas Senate has solidified its support for education savings accounts after approving Senate Bill 8, and the House, which has banned the use of public money for private education in its budget proposal, is considering its own legislation that seeks to pave the way for a school vouchers program, though its fate remains uncertain.

Hundreds of people descended on the Capitol on Tuesday to testify before a House committee about House Bill 4340 from Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls. The bill would create an education savings account program, which sets up funds with taxpayer money that parents can draw from to pay for their children's private schooling.

Those wanting to testify and hear discussion on the House proposal filled the gallery, sat on the floor and piled into two overflow rooms to wait out 12 hours of public testimony, which stretched into the early morning hours of Wednesday.

Whether the House, though, will approve any bill that uses public money for private education remains unclear after representatives stuck an amendment into the chamber's budget proposal last week prohibiting such uses of state funds.

HB 4340 prioritizes education funding for low-income students and children with disabilities or special education needs to seek private schooling.

"Every child is different," said Frank, the bill's author. "It's good for parents. It's good for kids, and it's good for schools."

The proposal is expected to cost about \$1.1 billion, according to its fiscal note.

Several Democratic members of the House Committee on Education voiced concern over HB 4340.

"In our public schools, we have not had an increase to the basic allotment since 2019," said Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin.

The basic allotment — \$6,160 — is the base level funding per student per year.

Instead of putting money in private schools, the state should invest more funding in public schools, said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, who has championed proposals to increase teacher pay and create better working conditions for educators.

"There's nothing that our public schools can't do if we give them the resources," Talarico said. "Why not just take these limited funds that we have and create a setting for every child?"

Can school choice hurt or help address growth?

Any education savings account bill would be good news for Brenda Howard, whose son participated in the school choice program in Arizona before relocating to Belton, about 60 miles north of Austin.

"We're a fast-growth area, which is causing problems," Howard said. "I believe school choice would be a pressure

valve."

Giving students more options could relieve stress on crowded schools, she said.

However, many school district officials statewide are apprehensive about school choice.

The Lockhart school district, about 30 miles south of Austin, has 6,532 students and is growing fast, officials say. Superintendent Mark Estrada worries a school choice bill would pull students — and the state funding that comes with them — away from the district.

"If you just look at 2% to 3% of students in Lockhart ISD, that's about 162 students," Estrada said. "The issue of scale is that we still have to staff all of those classrooms. That's real money leaving the public school system when we're still required to serve every student in every classroom."

Though there was no committee vote Tuesday on HB 4340, the split views among the Public Education Committee members became clear on April 6, when the full House passed its budget proposal, which included an amendment from Rep. Abel Herrero, D-Robstown, to ban using public funds for education savings accounts and similar programs. That amendment passed with 86 representatives voting in favor and 52 opposed.

Committee members from both parties — Reps. Alma Allen, D-Houston; Steve Allison, R-San Antonio; Ken King, R-Canadian; Oscar Longoria, D-Mission; Hinojosa and Talarico — voted in favor of Herrero's amendment, signaling their opposition to education savings accounts, according to a record of the vote.

Reps. Charles Cunningham, R-Humble; Brian Harrison, R-Midlothian; Cole Hefner, R-Mount Pleasant; and Matt Schaefer, R-Tyler, voted against Herrero's amendment. Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen; Harold Dutton Jr., D-Houston; and Cody Harris, R-Palestine, didn't vote.

That same day, the Senate passed SB 8 — its version of the education savings account program.

The House's April 6 budget vote, however, isn't necessarily a death knell for education savings account proposals. They could always become a part of negotiations between the House and Senate during bill reconciliation.

Other House representatives also proposed savings account bills Tuesday.

Harrison and Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano, highlighted bills that would create programs similar to those in HB 4340. Rep. Jacey Jetton, R-Richmond, proposed a bill that specifically focused on special education students and included additional funding for special education.

House OKs bill on drug imports - Cheaper medications may come from Canada

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When Donna Betts gets off work at a wealth management company, she heads to her shift as a retail associate. The Austin mother works 70 hours a week to keep up with the cost of rent, medical expenses for her daughter who has special needs and her own prescriptions.

Even with her second job, Betts cannot afford to refill her asthma medication most months. A series of hospitalizations forced her to adjust her lifestyle to avoid asthma attacks.

"There are certain times that I cannot go outside," Betts said. "We can't go to the park. We can't go outside and play. We can't go for a walk."

Like Betts, nearly 30% of Americans in 2022 failed to take their medicine as prescribed due to high costs, according to a poll by KFF, a nonpartisan health research and news nonprofit.

Texans pay more for prescription drugs than anyone else in the country, according to Definitive Healthcare, which produces data, insights and analytics on the health care market. On April 12, the Texas House passed House Bill 25, which would allow the state to import certain prescription drugs from Canada at a lower price for state agencies and consumers.

HB 25 by Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, was approved in a 144-1 vote in its final reading and has been forwarded to the Senate for consideration. Rep. Mark Dorazio, R-San Antonio, who voted against the bill said he intended to vote in support, according to his statement of vote in the House journal.

HB 25 has over 110 Republican and Democratic coauthors in the House. If the Senate approves the measure, the bill could lower the price of certain prescriptions by 70%, according to a news release from Talarico's office.

Drugs are cheaper in Canada than in the U.S. because Canada negotiates directly with drugmakers to set prices, according to USA Today.

"We can help ensure that Texas can afford the prescription drugs they need for themselves and for their families. This bill is about saving lives," Talarico said at an April 12 news conference.

Despite the bill's bipartisan support, HB 25 still faces obstacles, including a potential supply shortage in Canada and a stalled approval process with the Food Drug Administration.

Bipartisan support

might not be enough

In 2020, the Trump administration created a pathway for states to legalize the importation of certain types of drugs from Canada. A handful of states have passed legislation allowing prescription importation from Canada. In 2018, Vermont was the first state to pass legislation similar to HB 25.

Despite years having passed since importation has been federally allowed, no state has successfully imported prescriptions from Canada, said Meredith Freed, a senior policy analyst with KFF.

Once a state votes to allow drug imports from Canada, the federal Health and Human Services secretary must review the state's importation plan to make sure it meets federal safety and cost-saving requirements. Florida, Vermont, Maine, New Mexico and Colorado have all submitted importation plans to HHS for approval, but none have received the OK yet.

While the FDA has provided feedback to some state's proposed importation programs, it remains unclear why the agency continues to delay their approval, Freed said. Until a state's program receives federal clearance, it is unclear when Texans would start seeing lower prescription costs if HB 25 were to become law.

"Six states have already passed similar policies," Talarico said at a news conference. "They are first in line to take advantage of the savings that will be produced from an importation program."

"It is our job whether you're a Republican or a Democrat, whether you're a House member or a Senator ... it's our job to get our constituents at the front of the line," Talarico said.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis last year filed a lawsuit against the FDA for its delay and lack of transparency in the importation approval process.

One potential cause for delay was a lawsuit against the federal government by the drug industry lobby after the Trump administration's allowed drug importations. That lawsuit was not rejected until this year.

A primary driver for the delays could be safety concerns, Freed said.

Former HHS secretaries and FDA officials have voiced concerns about the agency's ability to ensure the imported drugs are safe, according to KFF. Under HB 25, eligible importation prescriptions would need to meet FDA standards.

Even if Texas receives federal approval, Canada's prescription supply might prevent some Texans from receiving their medicines at lower rates, Freed said.

In a comment to the FDA, the Canadian government said importing prescriptions could, "Adversely affect the health of Canadians" and "Will cause pressure on the Canadian drug supply, exacerbating drug shortages and limiting access to needed medicines in Canada."

Rep. Talarico's office told the American-Statesman that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said he is willing to help other nations with prescription drug supplies.

"Canadian law only prohibits the foreign distribution of certain drugs if those sales would create a drug shortage in Canada, and the number of drugs on that list is relatively small," Talarico's office said. "Supply issues are the exception — not the norm."

Texans affected by

high cost medicines

"Texans are having to choose between their medications and their rent. They're having to choose between their medications and their groceries," Talarico said. "We can fix that with this bill."

For Betts, the Austin mother, "Right now, the choice is, I have to pay for my medications, and my rent and her (daughter's) therapy. So, I have to work two jobs."

Betts' asthma prescription costs over \$400 without insurance in the U.S., but the Canadian import would cost a little over \$100, Betts said in speaking in support for HB 25 at a news conference.

With the current cost of her and her daughter's health care, Betts continues to sacrifice her prescription refills.

"Not being able to get these medications plays a part in every single day of my life. Every activity I do or don't do," Betts said.

In 2019, 78% of Americans were in favor of importing cheaper drugs from Canada, according to KFF. For Betts, cheaper prescriptions could be life-changing.

"Because of not being on the correct medication for the correct disease and the correct symptoms, it has cost me jobs," she said. "It has cost me time with my daughter."

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Ten Commandments bill poses legal questions

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Every public classroom in Texas could be required to display a copy of the Ten Commandment if a bill, which has already gained the Senate's blessing, gets the green light from the House.

The bill's supporters insist the Ten Commandments inspired many of the country's founding documents, but those opposed to the proposal worry it could exclude other religions and infringe on student and teacher rights to free religious expression.

The House Committee on Public Education on Tuesday heard an overview of the bill, SB 1515, which generated heated debate.

The Ten Commandments are significant to American history because the document informed the country's founding principles, said Rep. Candy Noble, R-Lucas.

"This legislation will bring back the historic tradition of recognizing America's religious heritage," Noble said.

Noble authored an identical bill in the House, HB 3448. Sen. Phil King, R-Weatherford, authored the Senate version, which passed that chamber on April 20.

Democratic members in the House Public Education Committee have raised concern about SB 1515 and the role the state is playing with children and religion.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, who is a Christian, said the bill is "un-American" and "un-Christian."

"Every time, on this committee, we try to teach basic sex education, but we can't because we're told that's the parents' role," Talarico said. "Now, you're putting literal commandments — religious commandments — in our classrooms, and we're told that's the state's role."

The Ten Commandments are foundational Christian principles that outline moral values such as "though shalt not kill" and "you shall have no other gods before me."

Noble argued the Ten Commandments was in many of the country's earliest textbooks and was an inspiration for America's founding documents.

"What we're talking about is a foundational document to our nation's educational history and judicial history," Noble said.

The legal argument behind SB 1515 is a complex one, said Steven Collis, a University of Texas law professor and director of the Bech-Loughlin First Amendment Center and of its Law and Religion Clinic.

What's clear from U.S. Supreme Court rulings is that long-established displays of the Ten Commandments, such as the statue on the Texas Capitol grounds, can remain in place, however, new displays bring up new challenges, he said.

"Going forward, courts have to analyze this according to historical practices and understandings," Collis said. "I think parties are going to have to litigate this out and figure out what are going to be the limits of the

Establishment Clause."

That clause prohibits Congress from making a law establishing a national religion.

The debate over religion in schools was also made more complex in July, when the U.S. Supreme Court determined a Washington public school coach was allowed to offer prayer before football games as long as the prayer wasn't coercing religion upon students.

Collis said religious free speech arguments are complex because displaying any religious items in schools leads to questions of which religion is being played up in these public facilities. However, many religious people will argue that lacking any faith is by default anti-religious, he said.

Even the argument that the Ten Commandments is a foundational piece of American history is complicated, he said. It's difficult to prove the U.S. Constitution stems from the commandments, he said.

In addition, many, but not all, founding fathers were Christian.

"Some of them were just deists," Collis said. "They believed in some form of deity but not necessarily Christianity. There were a lot of people at the time of the founding who were feeling like it was the age of reason, and religion was no longer necessary."

By print deadline on Tuesday afternoon, the House Education Committee had not finished hearing testimony on SB 1515 as lawmakers had been called to the House to hear other bills.

school choice bill - Abbott signals special session - Says he'd veto House's pared-down measure

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Author: Keri Heath; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 897 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

With the legislative clock ticking down, Gov. Greg Abbott said Sunday that he would veto the Texas House's latest slimmed-down version of a Senate school voucher bill and threatened to call lawmakers back for a special session to hammer out a proposal that would provide "meaningful school choice."

"Texas parents and their children deserve the time and effort it will take to pass critical school choice legislation this session," Abbott said in a tweet Sunday, just a day before the House Public Education Committee was set to take up Senate Bill 8.

The bill, authored by Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, proposed creating education savings accounts and making state funding available to parents for their children's private education. Since the bill moved from the Senate to the House, the number of children eligible for the program has dwindled from most of the 5.5 million Texas students to 800,000.

School choice has become a linchpin this legislative session for Abbott, who has toured numerous private schools across the state to tout the issue.

Though the House Public Education Committee would first need to advance any school choice proposal to the full chamber for a vote, House members have signaled their displeasure about such legislation. The House also approved its version of the state budget with a prohibition on using public funds for private education.

The original version of SB 8 would have made most students eligible to participate in an education savings account program and proposed making \$8,000 available annually to parents of children who left public schools to help them pay for their student's private tuition or other costs such as textbooks and tutoring. When the bill reached the House, it was pared down to offer the program only to students with disabilities and those who receive free or reduced-price lunches, or about 4 million total.

In the House committee's latest version of the bill, released over the weekend, only students with disabilities, those attending a failing campus or children with siblings in the program would be eligible.

"It also provides less funding for special education students than the original House version of the Senate bill and denies school choice to low-income families that may desperately need expanded education options for their children," Abbott said in his Sunday statement.

"Failure to expand the scope of school choice to something close to the Senate version or the original House version of the Senate bill will necessitate special sessions," Abbott said. "Parents and their children deserve no less."

As proposed in the House version, children in the program would have access annually to average per student spending in their zoned school district. The statewide average is \$9,052. Students with disabilities would get an additional \$1,500.

The bill would also significantly alter state testing and would replace the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness for students in higher grades with the Texas Success Initiative Assessment, which is geared toward college readiness.

During the committee hearing meeting Monday, House Public Education Committee Chairman Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, said the bill was meant to give parents more schooling options.

"This is not a public schools vs other schools issues," Buckley said. "I love and appreciate our public school system. This legislation isn't intended to be any accusation or attempt to take anything down."

Some children need a setting that's different from a traditional classroom, but families can't always pay the steep prices that private schools charge, said Tracy Hansen, principal and founder of Oak Creek Academy in Killeen.

"If a family cannot afford a private education, is that really a choice?" Hansen asked.

Some lawmakers, however, insisted that an education savings account program would give parents a way out of a school system that needs more money.

"I'm trying to figure out why we would be creating lifeboats when we're the one sinking the ship," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin. "Can the Legislature be the arsonist and the firefighter?"

Lawmakers have said they want to create savings accounts to help economically disadvantaged students, but the best way to do that is by funding public schools, said Rep. Alma Allen, D-Houston.

"We need to think seriously about fixing all of the schools," Allen said. "This is a sin what we are doing here today."

To Emily Dominguez, a prekindergarten bilingual teacher in the Bastrop district, lawmakers passing savings accounts would signal a lack of support for public education.

"This is a message of, 'We don't care about you,' from our state," Dominguez said. "We are telling our future educators, if we have any, that, 'You are going to struggle as an educator.' "

School choice has been one of the most divisive issues this session. Abbott spent months before and during the session traveling around the state to advocate for the proposal, investing significant time and political capital on school choice.

The House has twice signaled warnings that a vote on education savings accounts could be fraught in that chamber. When House members in April approved the chamber's version of the budget with the school voucher ban, it passed 86-52.

On May 10, the House shot down Buckley's attempt to call the committee to meet for a vote on SB 8 without posting rules — normally a routine approval — by a 76-65 vote.

As of Monday afternoon, the Public Education Committee had not returned to continue deliberations on SB 8 after breaking to conduct House business.

Pet boarding safety bill advances for Texas governor to endorse

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Legislation that would require some kennels and veterinary clinics in Texas to notify customers if they plan to leave pets unattended during their stays has cleared its final legislative hurdle and now awaits Gov. Greg Abbott's signature.

The measure, House Bill 2063 by Austin Democratic Rep. James Talarico, was filed in response to the heartbreaking Sept. 18, 2021, fire at a Georgetown animal boarding facility that left 75 dogs dead. The Senate signed off on it Tuesday, after the bill cleared the House in late April.

The bill would apply to kennels and veterinary clinics that provide boarding services for three or more dogs or cats.

"The fire in Georgetown was absolutely gut-wrenching," Talarico said in a news release. "My heart goes out to the families that lost their loving companions. After the fire, our community rallied together and called for action. Our legislation will ensure accidents like this never happen again in Texas."

The Georgetown kennel, Ponderosa Pet Resort, was unlicensed, had no fire detection equipment such as a smoke alarm and had no fire sprinkler system, according to a lawsuit filed against the facility. It was not legally required to have fire detection equipment or a sprinkler system, city officials have said.

Sexual entertainment bill advances - House measure no longer specifically targets drag shows

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House members advanced legislation that would prohibit sexually oriented performances in front of children, but, notably, it was Democrats who saw it as a victory after getting language removed from the bill that specifically targeted drag performers.

The revised Senate Bill 12, approved on second reading Friday in the House, now carries a broader definition of impermissible conduct, threatening with a criminal offense any representation, actual or simulated, of a sex act in the presence of a person under 18.

A drag performance would no longer be illegal unless that performance includes a sex act.

The concession reflects a win for drag performers, who've flooded the Capitol this legislative session to protest anti-drag proposals and tell lawmakers that nothing they do is inherently sexual.

In laying out the retooled bill Friday, Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano, said the initial version of the bill previously approved in the Senate included an "unnecessary reference to drag shows." He said the Senate's version might not hold up in court, citing little clarity on what acts fall under the ban.

"I don't care how an individual is dressed," Shaheen said later. "I don't want them conducting themselves in a sexual manner in front of a child."

After working with Shaheen to make the bill more palatable before Friday's vote, the House LGBTQ+ caucus recommended that Democrats not support or oppose the bill. Instead, the caucus asked that they sit it out entirely. In the end, 42 House members did not vote on Senate Bill 12, which passed 88-12 on the back of overwhelming Republican support.

The compromise was a source of celebration for the LGBTQ+ community after a week during which House members passed a bill to require transgender college athletes to compete on teams that align with their sex at birth and another bill to ban certain gender-affirming care for minors. The gender care bill is headed to Gov. Greg Abbott to sign into law after the Senate approved House changes.

SB 12 will come up for a final vote in the House on Saturday, when most Democrats are again expected to hit the white light on their desk that signals "present not voting." Assuming it passes, it will return to the Senate, which will review the House changes and decide whether to accept or reject them.

In April, the Senate passed a version of the bill that included in its definition of sexual oriented performance "a male performer exhibiting as a female, or a female performer exhibiting as a male." If the Senate insists on reviving that language, it will trigger a conference committee with House members to hash out the differences. The session ends May 29.

Shaheen, the bill's sponsor in the House, said discussions are ongoing with the Senate and the bill's author, Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola.

A separate bill by Hughes targeting drag performances, SB 1601, is stuck in a House committee and appears likely to die after failing to get a hearing. It proposes to ban libraries from receiving state funding for hosting any event in which a person dressing as a member of the opposite sex reads a book to a minor, if the person appearing in drag

is a primary element of the performance.

In SB 12, a business or a municipality that allows a sexually oriented performance could face a fine of up to \$10,000. A performer can be charged with a Class A misdemeanor.

A sexually oriented performance includes obvious definitions, like a lewd act, but also "contact occurring between one person and the buttocks, breast, or any part of the genitals of another person." It also requires that the performances appeal "to the prurient interest in sex."

Prurient is defined as having an excessive interest in sexual matters.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, conceded that the bill's latest version might extend its scope to additional artistic performances, including concerts and dances, but he said it was important to strike language that solely targeted drag performers.

"We produce some of the best drag performers in the nation," said Talarico, a member of the House LGBTQ+ caucus. "We didn't want to hurt them."

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Senate OKs revamped school bill - House unlikely to budge on education savings accounts

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[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas Senate on Tuesday approved its latest version of a school choice bill that it tacked on to a revamped House-approved school funding bill. It's the Senate's last-ditch effort to advance legislation that would make public money available to parents to help pay for their children's private school tuition.

Despite the eleventh-hour rally in the Senate, House members have long signaled they're unlikely to budge on their majority opposition to education savings accounts, a form of school choice similar to vouchers.

Gov. Greg Abbott has made passing broad school choice his signature priority and promised lawmakers if they didn't deliver, they'd be called back to Austin this summer or fall for a special session on the proposal. With the regular session ending Monday, Abbott is running out of time to fulfill a promise he spent months touting across the state and invested significant political capital in.

The latest version of school choice legislation passed out of the Senate, House Bill 100, would provide \$8,000 to any of the state's 5.5 million children in public schools and some in private school, who opt into the program, which is expected to cost \$500 million.

The bill would inject new money into public education and give students another option if they're not being served in public education, said Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, who sponsored the bill.

"Some need the freedom to find the school that meets their needs," Creighton said. "There are children with learning differences that need interventions that are not offered at their public school currently."

HB 100 includes many broadly supported provisions, such as increasing per pupil spending and raising teacher pay, said Sen. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas. However, the school choice portion of the bill will ultimately kill it, he warned.

"When you take something that you can't pass and put it on something that you should pass, it borders on spiteful," Johnson said. "We're weighing down something uncontroversial with something so controversial."

The Senate's 133-page version of HB 100 is vastly different from House's original proposal, which focused exclusively on school funding and proposed raising per pupil state funding by \$140 — from \$6,160 to \$6,300 — still a far cry from the \$900 increase most district officials have asked for.

The Senate revision would only raise per pupil funding to \$6,210, a \$50 increase.

Notably, HB 100's original author, Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian, has consistently opposed education savings accounts.

School choice shows Republican Party fracture in Texas House

As the Senate debated HB 100 into the late-night hours Tuesday, across the Capitol in the House, members slaughtered many Senate bills by postponing their consideration until after the session ends, a clear showing of frustration that the Senate either isn't taking up House bills or was stacking them with so many Senate priorities.

In presenting Creighton's teacher pay raise bill, Senate Bill 9, Rep. Harold Dutton berated the upper chamber for not advancing his own teacher pay legislation.

"There is a House of Representatives here that plays a part in whatever we do in the state," Dutton said. "I don't believe the Senate respects us. When they don't respect us, they expect us."

House members tacked on a slew of amendments to SB 9 with items the Senate has opposed, including a coveted \$1,000 increase to the state's per pupil funding.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, said it was "unconscionable" the Senate would put something as controversial as education savings accounts into a bill meant to give teachers and schools more money.

After advancing from the Senate, HB 100 will now head back to the House, where members will consider the Senate's changes to the bill. Members could simply not vote on the bill and let it die or appoint a committee to iron out the differences and hammer out a single proposal both chambers could consider before the session ends.

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Texas Legislature - School chaplain bill raises concerns - Measure aims to relieve shortage of counselors

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[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas House and Senate have approved a bill that would let school districts employ chaplains as a way to ease the shortage of counselors in schools, sending the bill to Gov. Greg Abbott to become law.

While some lawmakers and rights advocacy groups have raised concerns about the use of religious-affiliated staff in public schools, law experts say the bill skirts along a legal gray area concerning faith in campuses.

Senate Bill 763 would allow districts to employ chaplains or accept them as volunteers to provide support for students.

During the final House vote on the bill this week, Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, questioned the lack of requirements for participants in the chaplain program.

"Are you aware there are internet services that will ordain a chaplain with just 40 hours of training?" Talarico asked Rep. Cole Hefner, R-Mt. Pleasant, while debating the proposal.

Hefner, who was explaining the bill, said those rules would be up to local districts.

"I have complete and total faith in our schools to make the decisions to put the regulations they see fit in place to qualify these individuals," Hefner said.

For Brian Guinther, chief operating officer of the International Fellowship of Chaplains, being a chaplain is about helping people, not trying to convert them.

"The vast majority of times, a person seeking chaplain help might not even know the faith that the chaplain believes in," Guinther said.

However, the proposal raised concerns for some over a chaplain's qualifications.

Chloe Goodman, constituent services manager with Equality Texas, worries chaplains wouldn't be trained to the same standards as counselors.

Goodman is also concerned the religious association could turn away some students.

"If they're providing spiritual guidance counseling, I don't foresee queer kids or nonreligious students going to them for guidance," Goodman said.

And in small districts, opponents of the bill worry, a school might employ only a chaplain, giving students no other option.

The bill will operate in a legal gray area, said Steven Collis, director of the University of Texas Bech-Loughlin First Amendment Center.

"We have to look at historical practices when it comes to what a government can do and can't do," Collis said.

It's not uncommon for public entities, such as police departments or military branches, to employ chaplains, Collis said.

The question really comes down to intent, which is hard to prove, and the way districts implement the law, he said.

"It would be a violation if it's set up in a way that favors one religion or if students are forced to go see chaplains," Collis said. "It would be a problem if chaplains are serving in a way that is preaching."

If school districts use the rule in a way that clearly favors one religion over another, giving students of other faiths nowhere to go, that could create a problem, he said.

"The law in this area isn't perfectly clear and never has been," Collis said. "I think there's a way to set this up that will pass the current understanding of the Establishment Clause. I also think it's rife with potential pitfalls."

The Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution prevents the government from adopting a state religion.

Goodman was also concerned a chaplain program could move a step toward bringing Christianity into public schools.

It was a concern Talarico raised when he questioned the motivations of the National School Chaplains Association, which spoke in favor of the bill during a committee hearing.

The association's CEO, Rocky Malloy, has said he wants to bring Christianity into classrooms.

The association didn't return American-Statesman requests for comment.

Guinther argues chaplains aren't exclusive to a single faith.

"Chaplaincy is about helping others handle the stress of life, not drawing people to a specific faith," Guinther said. "Now, faith may be what motivates chaplains to show up to help others, but is not something that chaplains should ever push on others."

The bill has passed both chambers and is awaiting Gov. Greg Abbott's approval to become law.

Israel to run for Travis County tax assessor-collector - Ex-state representative lost in mayoral campaign

June 12, 2023 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Hogan Gore; Austin American-Statesman | Section: News | 565 Words

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"I'm excited to bring my experience to bear on behalf of Travis County."

Celia Israel

Running for Travis County tax assessor-collector

Coming off a narrow defeat in Austin's mayoral election in December, former state Rep. Celia Israel has announced she will run for Travis County tax assessor-collector.

Israel, who lost the runoff election to Kirk Watson by fewer than 900 votes, is seeking to take over the countywide position tasked with collecting taxes, issuing license plates and registering voters, among other clerical duties.

Israel officially filed Thursday to run for the office in the 2024 election, and she said she hopes to serve in the position, which affects every resident of the county.

"I continue to be dedicated to public service and the idea that it is always an honor to serve," Israel said in a statement to the American-Statesman. "I've served well in the Legislature over the last nine years standing up for voting rights and supporting thoughtful and creative local government."

Current Travis County Tax Assessor-Collector Bruce Elfant said Thursday that he would not seek reelection.

Though he has enjoyed the job, an upcoming birthday is a cue to move on, Elfant said.

"Next week, I'll turn 65," he said in a video posted to Facebook on Thursday. "And while I'm told 65 is the new 55, I just don't want to be working full time until I'm 70."

Opting to move toward retirement after serving as assessor-collector since 2013 and as a county constable for the two decades before that, Elfant thanked constituents and colleagues and recommended that the next assessor-collector have management experience and a desire to serve multiple terms if sought by voters.

Elfant said he would not endorse a candidate for the office.

Israel's experience in public service comes from a stint as a member of the Texas House, representing an area stretching from North Austin near Round Rock to the east toward Elgin and south toward Webberville.

Elected in a special election, she served House District 50 from 2014 until her run for Austin mayor last year. Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, was then elected to that district.

While in the Legislature, Israel promoted election reform measures, such as allowing voters to register online and modifying requirements to prove voting eligibility.

During her run for mayor, she campaigned heavily on providing more affordable housing and combating affordability issues in Austin. Israel outperformed Watson in Travis County during the general election before losing the county by fewer than three dozen votes in the runoff.

Watson was able to beat Israel after gaining support from Austin voters in Williamson and Hays counties, contributing to her overall defeat by roughly 880 votes.

In running for the assessor-collector's office, which takes in \$4.3 billion in taxes each year, Israel would need to court only Travis County voters.

In addition to collecting tax dollars, the office annually registers more than 850,000 vehicles, collects \$4.1 million in court fees and fines, and registers nearly 800,000 voters, according to its website.

"I'm excited to bring my experience to bear on behalf of Travis County taxpayers to ensure user-friendly and efficient operations that treat everyone with respect," Israel said in her statement.

"I'm excited to bring my experience to bear on behalf of Travis County."

Celia Israel

Running for Travis County tax assessor-collector

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Phelan preps for special session - Committee will consider various education issues

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[OpenURL Link](#)

In preparation for an anticipated special session focused on a controversial school choice program, the Texas House established a new committee this week to study education issues.

House Speaker Dade Phelan on Monday announced the creation of the Select Committee on Educational Opportunity and Enrichment and named the members to serve on it as the House and Senate are at odds over whether to use state funding to subsidize private education.

The education savings accounts program Gov. Greg Abbott has been pushing would allow parents to use public money to pay for students' private school tuition or home-schooling costs. The House has come out against the measure though the Senate is in support.

During the regular legislative session, the split over the controversial program between the House and Senate ultimately brought down a bill that would have increased school funding when the Senate tacked on the so-called school choice proposal to the education funding legislation.

The House Educational Opportunity and Enrichment Committee will be chaired by Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, who headed the House's education committee during the regular session, which ended May 29, Phelan announced Monday.

The select committee will consider issues such as ensuring quality education for all students, improving academic outcomes and modernizing assessment and accountability measures, Phelan said in a news release.

"This committee will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of education in Texas, ensuring that our students have equal access to quality education while simultaneously supporting our dedicated educators and institutions," Phelan said.

The committee, which has begun working, is expected to deliver a report by Aug. 11 on how to create more educational opportunities for students.

The 15-person committee is made up of 10 Republicans and five Democrats.

School choice became one of the divisive issues of the regular legislative session, and Abbott threatened to call a special session over the proposal when it became clear the House didn't have the votes to pass the legislation.

Abbott campaigned heavily for school choice programs before and during the session, traveling the state to visit mostly private schools and give speeches about what he called parental rights.

House Educational Opportunity Committee members

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, chairman

Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins, D-San Antonio, vice chairwoman

Rep. Trent Ashby, R-Lufkin

Rep. Keith Bell, R-Forney

Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston

Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls

Rep. Cody Harris, R-Palestine

Rep. Cole Hefner, R-Mt. Pleasant

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin

Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian

Rep. Oscar Longoria, D-Mission

Rep. Will Metcalf, R-Conroe

Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin

Rep. Gary VanDeaver, R-New Boston

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Texas Legislature - Panel targets education issues - Funding, retention discussed ahead of special session

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A Texas House committee tasked with developing public education policy recommendations on Tuesday heard hours of testimony from educators and advocates who largely asked lawmakers for additional school funding and resources to help retain teachers.

The lengthy meeting was the first for the committee, which House Speaker Dade Phelan formed in anticipation of a special session focused on education, especially surrounding school choice.

Teacher retention, more school funding and increased resources for special education were among the common themes brought up by those who testified before the House Committee on Educational Opportunity and Enrichment.

The committee met at the John H. Reagan building near the Capitol.

Many educators from across the state, including Montgomery school district Superintendent Heath Morrison, told committee members that districts need more resources for their staff.

"People in the private sector don't apologize for earning their worth," Morrison said. "In the public sector, we make our teachers feel guilty about maybe a pay raise to be something to consider."

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, noted that many teachers have to work second jobs to pay for their living costs. He noted a commonly cited number that the state would need to raise its current \$6,160 per pupil base funding by \$1,000 to keep up with inflation.

"It's my opinion we shouldn't be messing with any pet projects or education savings accounts until we do the \$1,000 increase," Talarico said.

Some House members also expressed concern about increased testing or the effects of changing the format of the state's standardized test, known as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness.

It's important these tests don't cause stress or burden to students, said committee Chairman Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen.

"The accountability systems are really for the adults," Buckley said. "We do that to change adult behavior. We do that on the backs of kids. The stress level we see in our classrooms, in our schools, right or wrong, it's real."

Lawmakers are expecting a special session this summer or fall focused on education-related matters after Gov. Greg Abbott signaled he would call one to deliberate education savings accounts – a program that makes public money available to parents for alternative school programs, largely private schools.

Abbott has fervently pushed for the program, also called school choice, but Democrats and many rural Republican lawmakers in the House have strongly come out against the proposal.

Proposals that attempted to create school choice programs during the regular session often included teacher pay increases, which most public school districts have advocated for.

Lawmakers also left about \$4 million in public school funding unallocated at the end of the regular session on May 29. While the money is accounted in the budget, lawmakers didn't pass any bills that would direct the state how to spend the funds.

The committee is scheduled to meet Wednesday to hear testimony from more education advocates.

As of Tuesday, Abbott hadn't officially announced when an education-focused special session would be called.

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DPS PATROLS - Troopers' overtime in Austin hit \$3.7M - Abbott deployed them despite local criticism

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In the first three months after the Texas Department of Public Safety began a special patrol assignment in Austin – first in partnership with the city and then, after the city backed out, on orders from Gov. Greg Abbott – the department spent \$3.7 million in overtime wages, according to payroll records the American-Statesman obtained through a public records request.

The pay records provide a deeper look into the DPS's increased presence in Austin and reveal in hard numbers the cost to Texans for the state to beef up policing measures in the capital city as local officials deal with an officer shortage.

The overtime records show that through Aug. 15, the DPS averaged nearly \$1.2 million in overtime a month for those first three months. They reflect a three-month period from the day the partnership started on March 30, minus a month and a half that it was put on hold when Abbott diverted troopers to the border.

In total, troopers worked more than 61,000 overtime hours.

Some local state representatives expressed concerns about how much the state is spending to provide policing in Austin, especially since Mayor Kirk Watson canceled the city's involvement in July over concerns about the troopers' enforcement standards and tactics.

"Theoretically, public dollars spent on public safety, you consider that a good investment," state Rep. Lulu Flores, D-Austin, said. "Since the city is no longer requesting (DPS help), then perhaps it's not money being well spent."

The "partnership," as it was called when Watson first announced it, is essentially dead. While the DPS continues to operate in the city through its Austin Violent Crime Task Force, this is without any guidance from the city or the Austin Police Department. That represents a contrast from before, when the DPS worked with the Police Department to determine the areas with a high volume of 911 calls and incidents.

Abbott has regularly expressed his support of deploying more DPS troopers to Austin, posting multiple times on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, that the troopers are helping address crime in the city. Abbott's office said the troopers have made thousands of arrests, including 1,400 on felony charges, and seized 1.75 million doses of fentanyl.

In a presentation last month, the DPS provided data that show violent crime in Austin is down 18% from the four-week average before the partnership began.

"As the City of Austin reduced their police force, Gov. Abbott deployed DPS troopers to protect and serve to ensure the safety of Texans in our capital city," Andrew Mahaleris, Abbott's press secretary, said in a statement. "Public safety is a top priority for the Governor, and he will continue to deploy all resources to keep the streets of Austin and communities across our state safe."

Breaking down DPS overtime

The pay records show that nearly 950 state troopers have worked overtime as part of the Austin task force. Over the first three months, those with the highest workloads made anywhere from \$14,000 to \$24,000 in overtime

wages.

The DPS declined multiple requests for an interview to discuss certain aspects of the Austin task force. The department did provide the Statesman with a copy of its official overtime policies, which show employees are paid time and a half for working more than eight hours in a day or for more than 40 hours in a week.

Under DPS policy, some executive and administrative staff are exempt from overtime policies, meaning they are not eligible for overtime. Those who aren't exempt could either be commissioned or noncommissioned staff. Commissioned staff, which is any sworn law enforcement officer, can work up to 320 overtime hours a year. Noncommissioned staff, which includes all other staff who are not licensed law enforcement officers, can work up to 160 overtime hours a year.

Trying to offset nearly 330 unfilled positions, Austin police have worked a lot of overtime themselves. During a recent meeting of the city's Public Safety Commission, the Police Department said that since June 17 it had spent \$30 million on overtime in this fiscal year – more than any year since 2018. The fiscal year goes through September.

Additionally, the department began offering double pay, instead of the usual time and a half, for anyone who works a patrol shift from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. or takes an overnight shift at the 911 call center.

Jeff Greenwalt, Austin police chief of staff, said the DPS presence in the city helped deter crime by aiding officers in responding to calls during the staffing shortage.

"We have a responsibility to keep our community safe, and this has become increasingly difficult with our short staffing," Greenwalt said. "Their continued presence within Austin, even after our partnership ended, has provided assistance to our officers as we go through this unprecedented and national challenge to fill our ranks."

What happened with the Austin and DPS partnership?

Watson announced the partnership on March 27 after striking a deal with Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick. The DPS began patrols in Austin three days later on March 30.

This came two months into the state legislative session and shortly after a lawmaker, state Sen. Drew Sparks, R-Muenster, blasted Watson after a woman from his district was assaulted in downtown Austin by a man whom police described as transient.

On May 13, about a month and a half later, Abbott suspended the partnership and diverted troopers from Austin to the U.S.-Mexico border for his multibillion-dollar border initiative, Operation Lone Star.

At the end of June, it was announced that the partnership would resume July 2. But just 10 days later, Watson ended the partnership after a 10-year-old boy told a TV station that troopers pulled out and pointed their weapons at him during a traffic stop in which he was a passenger in a vehicle. Body camera footage released later showed that they did not point their weapons at the child.

The incident built on existing concerns about the DPS's increased presence. After Watson announced the partnership, local activists immediately objected over concerns that the DPS would overpolice communities of color. Data then showed that through the first few weeks, 9 out of 10 people arrested by the DPS in Austin were Black or Latino.

Pulling rank over Watson, Abbott announced after the incident involving the young boy that not only would the DPS continue its patrol strategies, but that the state would deploy 30 more troopers to Austin. That brought the total number of troopers devoted to Austin to 130.

What do state leaders think

about the amount?

Local state leaders have varying opinions about the millions the state is spending on overtime for the DPS troopers in Austin.

Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, said the overtime might be required because Operation Lone Star has caused the DPS to divert much of its personnel to the border. Howard said the DPS has historically provided support to law enforcement across the state, including in cities like Austin, and that there's an "expectation" that the DPS will be able to help keep communities safe.

"If they do not have sufficient resources to make that happen, without utilizing overtime, I would suggest that what needs to be looked at is the funding of Operation Lone Star and getting some of those funds and those personnel back into keeping Texas communities safe as opposed to what appears too many of us to be a political stunt at the border," Howard told the Statesman.

Mahaleris, from Abbott's office, said that without Operation Lone Star every criminal arrested and all drugs seized as part of Abbott's border initiative would have made their way into the state.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, echoed some of these concerns about Operation Lone Star and said Abbott is more concerned with "political stunts" than "solutions."

If Abbott wanted to improve public safety in Austin, Talarico said, the governor would invest in the Austin Police Department, listen to community members who say they don't want the DPS patrols in the city and put more money into programs aimed at preventing crime.

"It's hypocritical for our state government to claim to know more about public safety than local leaders do because local leaders are the ones on the ground, trying to make our communities safer, while the Texas state government allows weapons of war to run rampant across our state (and) have continually underfunded mental health resources," Talarico said.

Special session - School choice, funding are focus on first day - Chances uncertain for K-12 legislation

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"The future of Texas begins in the classroom."

Sen. Brandon Creighton

Republican from Conroe who chairs the Senate Education Committee

The first day of the third special legislative session began Monday with lawmakers pushing different public education proposals — from school choice to increasing funding — though whether Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate can agree on and pass meaningful K-12 school legislation remains to be seen.

Gov. Greg Abbott and conservative lawmakers have called for universal school choice, but Democrats and many rural Republicans have opposed the program, which proposes to use public money to fund children's private school costs. Instead, those against school choice are calling for greater investments in public education.

Political tensions are high between the two chambers after months of bickering over other issues, including Attorney General Ken Paxton's impeachment proceedings. The House in late May overwhelmingly voted to impeach Paxton on several charges, including bribery and abuse of office, but the Senate acquitted the attorney general of any wrongdoing in a trial last month.

The Senate has several committee meetings scheduled this week to discuss education issues.

On Monday, Sen. Brandon Creighton, a Republican from Conroe who chairs the Senate Education Committee, filed Senate Bill 2, a proposal that would inject \$5.2 billion into per-student funding, teacher raises and an already existing teacher performance bonus program.

"The future of Texas begins in the classroom, and it is incumbent on lawmakers to unleash the potential of education for the 6 million students we serve," Creighton said. "This package of legislation infuses historic new funds into public schools, raises the basic allotment and provides immediate across-the-board raises for Texas educators."

The bill proposes to give each teacher a \$3,000 bonus and give districts with less than 5,000 students a teacher retention bonus, according to the bill's memo. SB 2 would also increase per-student spending, called the basic allotment, by \$75 from \$6,160 to \$6,235. Under the legislation, school safety funding would double from \$10 to \$20 per student and from \$15,000 to \$30,000 per campus.

Creighton also said Monday that he planned to file Senate Bill 1, which he said would be called the Texas Education Freedom Act, though it hadn't been filed by that afternoon.

School choice proposals involve using public money for a child's private school tuition and are often referred to as vouchers or education savings accounts. Proponents say the program expands options for students. But those opposed to it worry that it would drain money from public schools.

The Texas House gaveled in just briefly Monday before recessing until Thursday.

House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, told reporters after the House floor session that his office is working with Abbott's staff on the school choice issue but offered no specific legislative language. Asked if school choice could be separated from the larger issue of providing more money overall to public education, the two-term Republican described it as a "chicken and egg" question as to which topic might be settled first.

"We're going to have both," he said. "We have to have both. And we're in discussions with the governor's office on that. We were meeting two to three times a day."

Phelan also noted that some rural Republican House members who have long opposed diverting public money to private schools must be "comfortable with" any school choice bill that might make it through the lower chamber.

"But school finance is very important to this," he said. "The governor knows that, and again, he's been working with us on an hourly basis."

Phelan also promised the House would pass a measure to increase teachers' pay and that it would be retroactive to the start of the current school year.

Before the House gavelled in Monday afternoon, House Democrats held a news conference berating any kind of school choice legislation.

"Vouchers may sound good, but once you dig into the details, you realize they're ripping you off," said Austin-area Democratic Rep. James Talarico.

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, called for more funding for public education. Those opposed to vouchers, including Hinojosa, have said an education savings account program would divert money away from public schools.

Instead, students, schools and teachers need more money, she said.

"We can't expect them to have a fair shot unless we do our part," Hinojosa said.

After a similar news conference by Senate Democrats, Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, D-Austin, said Sen. Jose Menendez, D-San Antonio, was filing a bill proposing significant funding for school finance, such as a \$1,000 increase to per-student spending and universal prekindergarten.

"I have to hope that something passes at some point because public education is the greatest economic development to ever be devised," Eckhardt said.

"The future of Texas begins in the classroom."

Sen. Brandon Creighton

Republican from Conroe who chairs the Senate Education Committee

Special legislative session - House Dems unveil school funding bill; hurdles ahead

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Texas House Democrats are throwing their weight behind an education funding bill that would give teachers a \$15,000 bonus and increase per-student school funding by almost \$2,800 – a massive package that could likely go nowhere this special session.

House Bill 177 is meant to foil Gov. Greg Abbott's push for school choice, a program that would use public money to help pay for eligible students' private schooling or other education-related costs.

While Democrats have said a significant education funding boost is needed to give public schools more resources, Abbott has signaled that he has no interest in signing an education funding package into law until after lawmakers pass school choice in Texas. Previous school choice proposals have died in the House, and the lower chamber's Democrats have said they remain steadfast in their opposition.

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, who on Thursday introduced HB 177, said her proposal would give schools an infusion of much-needed funding. It was not clear Thursday how much the proposal would cost as no fiscal note was attached to the bill.

"It's time we stop paying just lip service to teachers and start paying them their actual worth," Hinojosa said.

HB 177 would increase per-student funding by \$2,787 – from \$6,160 to \$8,947. State money allocated to districts per student is the building block for the state's public education funding formula. Hinojosa's bill also proposes to make increases to per-student funding when inflation rises.

The bill would give teachers, librarians, counselors and nurses a one-time \$15,000 bonus and \$5,000 for some other nonadministrative employees. It would also inject more state money into special education and security costs to help fill the gap between what districts spent on those items and what the state gave them.

Is Texas HB 177 likely to pass?

During an event last week with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, Abbott insisted he wouldn't expand the parameters for which he called the special session to include school funding until after lawmakers passed his signature priority: education savings accounts.

"Once ESAs are passed, I will put on the legislative call the full funding of public education, including teacher pay raises for teachers across the state of Texas," Abbott said.

The Texas Senate on Oct. 12 passed a \$500 million education savings account proposal – Senate Bill 1, which would make \$8,000 in state funding available for every eligible student to be used toward private school tuition or other education costs. The bill's author, Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, estimated that it would help 60,000 of the state's 5.5 million students in public schools.

SB 1 has now moved to the House, but members haven't signaled that they're close to reaching the votes needed in the lower chamber to pass the school choice proposal.

The House would need 76 votes to pass an education savings account bill, Rep. Ron Reynolds, D-Missouri City, who chairs the Texas Legislative Black Caucus said Monday during the state's NAACP annual convention.

"Right now, they don't have it," Reynolds said. "They don't have anywhere near close to it."

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, on Thursday reiterated Reynolds' comments and insisted the legislative coalition against school choice, which includes Democrats and some rural Republicans, would "stand strong."

He also criticized Abbott for making investments in education funding a prisoner of school choice.

"The governor has taken hostages in his attempt to pass his private school voucher scheme and those hostages are our kids," Talarico said. "No kids. No bribes. No deal."

Despite the limited scope of Abbott's special session call – passing school choice, strengthening border security and restricting COVID-19 vaccine mandates – the Senate on Oct. 12 also advanced a \$5.2 billion school funding proposal.

SB 2 offers much less money in comparison to the House Democrats' proposal. The Senate bill would deliver a \$75 increase to per-student spending and offer \$3,000 teacher bonuses. SB 2 also doubles security spending from \$10 per student to \$20 and \$15,000 per campus to \$30,000.

The House Education Committee as of Thursday had yet to meet, a necessary first step to passing school-related legislation.

Abbott has threatened to call lawmakers back for a fourth special session if they don't pass an expansive school choice bill. He has also threatened to throw his support behind opponents of Republican lawmakers who vote against a school choice bill.

Before calling a third special session this year, Abbott called two special sessions over the summer for lawmakers to work together to pass the state's biggest property tax in history – an \$18 billion package meant to drive down local tax rates and help homeowners pay less on their properties.

Texas lawmakers grapple with school choice proposals

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Texas lawmakers are locked in a stalemate over a proposed \$500 million program to publicly fund private school tuition for some of Texas' 5.5million school children.

The proposal, called school choice, prompted Gov. Greg Abbott to call the ongoing legislative special session, the third this year, and has sparked highly charged debate among teachers, parents, lawmakers and school administrators.

For now, lawmakers have been largely occupied with bills related to the border and COVID-19 vaccine mandates – other issues Abbott added to this special session's agenda. However, with only a little more than a week left in the session, the House and Senate will have to either develop an agreement or forgo the school choice legislation.

What is school choice?

School choice is one of many terms used to describe programs that use public money to pay for students' private school tuition or other education-related costs like home-schooling or tutors.

People also call such programs "vouchers," though school choice proponents don't typically use the term.

Abbott and the Legislature are calling the program "education savings accounts." Most legislation proposed this year would set up a state-managed account for each student in the program to house the money and disperse it to a private school or other vendors.

What would a program look like?

Both the Texas Senate and House have proposed school choice bills.

Senators on Oct. 12 passed Senate Bill 1, which would create a \$500 million program that gives \$8,000 to participating children annually.

The Senate bill prioritizes students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, low-income students and children who receive special education services.

House Education Committee Chairman Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, has filed House Bill 1, which includes education savings accounts.

The behemoth House bill – 180 pages strong – also contains proposals for school funding, teacher retention programs and other school-related issues. The bill hasn't yet been heard in the education committee, a necessary first step toward passage, so the bill's viability remains unclear.

Why are we talking about school choice?

Abbott had designated an education savings account program as one of his priorities for the regular legislative session — a biannual 140-day session beginning in January every odd-numbered year.

Although the Senate passed a school choice bill, House Democrats and many rural Republicans in the lower

chamber have vehemently opposed such programs over concerns they would divert funding from public schools.

However, Abbott has poured significant political capital behind passing school choice. Last year and this year, he has toured the state to promote a savings account program.

Abbott has threatened to call lawmakers back for a fourth special session if they don't pass an education savings account program this special session, which began Oct. 9. He also has insisted he'd campaign in the upcoming March primary elections against Republicans who oppose school choice.

"Large majorities of the people who really go vote, who will be going to vote this February and March in your district, want school choice," Abbott said during an Oct. 12 event with the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation. "If you're going to vote your district, as you want to do, you will vote in favor of school choice."

Why do people support school choice?

Proponents of using public money to pay for private education have said the programs open doors to students who need services not provided by public schools who can't afford private school tuition.

When Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, presented his SB 1 proposal to the Senate, he said such a program would give parents the ability to make better choices about their child's education.

"We must recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't fit the needs of our diverse student population," Creighton said.

Why do people oppose school choice?

Public school administrators have spoken against the bill because they worry state money used for a school choice program would be diverted from investments in public education.

Instead, many advocates want that money to go to public schools, which they say are severely underfunded.

During a news conference last week, Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, highlighted that public schools need more money to pay their staff and to fund education programs.

"It's time we stop paying just lip service to teachers and start paying them their actual worth," Hinojosa said.

Several disability rights groups have also opposed education savings accounts over concerns that special education students who leave the public school system will lose their federal protections.

Will school choice pass?

Whether lawmakers can reach an agreement is yet to be seen.

Without movement on a school choice bill, Abbott has insisted he won't expand his call for the special session to include funding for public schools, which has been coveted by public school advocates and administrators.

During special sessions, lawmakers are largely limited to legislation the governor outlines for them.

The only education issue Abbott included in this special session's agenda is school choice, though he has discretion to expand it.

Many House lawmakers, however, appear unwilling to make a funding deal that would include school choice, and a coalition of Democrats and rural Republicans in the lower chamber appears to be uncompromising on that front.

"The governor has taken hostages in his attempt to pass his private school voucher scheme and those hostages are our kids," Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, said last week. "No kids. No bribes. No deal."

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House, Senate swift to file school choice, funding bills

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As the Legislature entered its fourth special session, both chambers have unveiled proposals to use state money for private education and invest billions in funding into public schools.

The House gavelled in for the new session Tuesday, mere hours after adjourning sine die on this year's third special session, with a call from Gov. Greg Abbott to pass laws on school choice, school finance and safety funding.

School choice proposals, also called vouchers and education savings accounts, would use state money to help pay for children's private school tuition.

The controversial program has divided lawmakers all year, with Democrats and rural Republicans in the House forming a coalition that has remained opposed out of concern such proposals would bleed funding from public schools. Abbott has invested significant political capital this year in pushing the issue and has threatened lawmakers that he will help prop up opponents during primary races if they vote against his signature priority.

In his announcement of the fourth special session, Abbott insisted he was calling lawmakers back "to complete their critical work to empower Texas parents to choose the best education pathway for their child."

House Democrats on Tuesday voiced their frustration with Abbott continuing to call lawmakers back into session to try to pass school choice bills after the House has rejected such measures all year.

"This is the highest level of gubernatorial obstinance," said House Democratic Caucus Chairman Trey Martinez Fischer, of San Antonio. "'No' means 'no.'"

While some rural Republicans have expressed interest in compromising, Democratic House members were confident Tuesday that enough lawmakers remain opposed to a voucher bill to block it from advancing, said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin.

"Our bipartisan majority for public schools is strong," said Talarico, who co-chairs the Democrats' education committee. "Vouchers have only gotten more unpopular over the last year."

As exhausted lawmakers returned Tuesday to the Capitol to open the new session, the chairmen of both chambers' education committees - Rep. Brad Buckley in the House and Sen. Brandon Creighton in the Senate - filed their school choice and education funding bills.

With some revisions, both bills were similar to previous versions that failed to make it through the legislative process.

House Bill 1 is similar to the bill Buckley filed during the third special session, with some revisions.

HB 1 would create an education savings account program that would allocate about \$10,500 annually per eligible child to use on private school tuition. The voucher funding per student would be based on the state formula for public school financing, according to the bill.

The proposal prioritizes children with disabilities and those from low-income families, and it requires participating students to pass the state's standardized test, or a similar assessment, to remain in the program.

The bill also includes funding for schools such as:

A \$540 increase to per student spending, from \$6,160 to \$6,700.

Inflation adjustments for per student spending every two years.

One-time bonuses of \$4,000 to full-time teachers and \$2,000 for part-time teachers.

Pay increases for teachers tied to inflation adjustments in per student spending.

Establishing a teacher residency program.

\$750 million in special education funding.

\$1.1 billion in funding for charter facilities through 2030.

Creighton, R-Conroe, also refiled Senate Bills 1 and 2, his school choice and education funding bills.

While the bills sailed through the Senate in the regular and third special sessions, they've hit roadblocks in the House.

SB 1 would create a \$500 million education savings account program open to all Texas children, with priority given to children who come from low-income families or have special needs.

Children who attend a private school would get \$8,000 annually. The bill would also allocate \$1,000 annually per child for home-schooled students.

SB 2 also attempts to improve education funding and programs in public schools with:

Giving a \$75 increase in per student funding, from \$6,160 to \$6,235.

Establishing a grant program for teacher recruitment efforts.

Increasing safety funding by \$20 per student and \$30,000 per campus.

Offering teacher retention payments of \$10,000 per teacher for districts with 5,000 students or fewer and \$3,000 per teacher for districts with more than 5,000 students.

The House Education Committee will meet Thursday to consider advancing HB 1 on to the full House.

Lawmakers debate school choice - Texas House panel again hears proposal backed by Abbott

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In what felt like a "Groundhog Day" scenario, education lawmakers debated and listened to the public speak about the House's school choice and finance proposal Thursday.

In a hearing of the House's Educational Opportunity and Enrichment Select Committee, lawmakers spoke passionately about House Bill 1, the proposed package that would deliver a school choice program, which uses tax dollars to fund a child's private school education.

The hearing is a necessary first step in moving the bill toward a full hearing in the House, where school choice — also called vouchers — has bitterly divided lawmakers.

The committee members had not voted on the legislation by press time Thursday.

While lawmakers have heard school choice bills in at least half a dozen committee hearings this year, the full House has yet to vote on the issue, which Gov. Greg Abbott has thrown his full political weight behind.

Over the year, opposition among Democrats and rural Republicans has blocked the legislation over fears it will draw money away from public school systems.

In a packed room Thursday, school administrators and education analysts spent hours talking to lawmakers about their support of or opposition to school choice.

Although the \$7.6 billion HB 1 would give billions to public schools and raise per-pupil funding by \$540, Democrats and some rural Republicans have vehemently opposed the proposal.

The bill would draw money away from public schools already hit by inflation and teacher shortages, said Austin-area Democratic Rep. James Talarico.

"We can't compromise because we don't share the same goal," Talarico said. "The other side is playing for keeps. The other side is playing the long game. My school districts desperately need funding."

Public schools are the centerpiece of rural communities, said Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian. King is hesitant to vote for anything that could reduce funding for those schools, he said.

"I will never ever consider a voucher program and leave public schools without fully funding them," King said.

Those in support of the proposal insist it could give options to students who aren't getting served in public schools and whose parents can't otherwise afford private schools.

"I'm trying to figure out when it's bad to have another option," said Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls. "That is the least child-centric, least parent-centric position that can be taken."

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, who authored HB 1, insisted school choice programs put the parents in the front seat of their child's education.

"They are the most important factor in their kids' education," Buckley said. "They just are."

Buckley is the chair of the House Public Education Committee.

"I think too often our kids are viewed as a business decision, and that's unfortunate," Buckley said.

The Senate has also filed a school choice bill, Senate Bill 1, and a school finance bill, Senate Bill 2.

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Schools choice measure advances to full House - Sets stage for legislative showdown

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[OpenURL Link](#)

A \$7.6 billion school choice and funding bill is set to advance to the Texas House for a floor vote for the first time this year, setting the stage for a showdown over the controversial issue.

The House Educational Enrichment and Opportunity Select Committee voted Rep. Brad Buckley's House Bill 1 out of committee Friday with a 10-4 vote.

Whether the House has the votes to pass the controversial issue, however, remains to be seen, and Gov. Greg Abbott signaled Friday that he could call lawmakers back for multiple special sessions if they refuse to pass school choice legislation.

School choice, also called vouchers or education savings accounts, would use tax dollars to pay for a child's private school tuition or other education expenses. The issue has bitterly divided House Republicans over the last year, despite Abbott throwing his full gubernatorial weight behind the issue.

In Friday's party-line vote Friday, the select committee moved the legislation out for a full vote by the House.

While the Texas Senate has passed similar legislation twice, the House has yet to even take a full vote on vouchers. After Democrats and many rural House Republicans opposed such bills, Abbott dragged lawmakers back to the Capitol for third and fourth special sessions, 30-day periods beyond the typical spring session.

On Friday, Abbott said he'd do it again. Answering questions in front of reporters, he insisted he wouldn't support a school funding bill without a school choice component.

"I would just have to veto it and start all over again with spending December here, January here, maybe February here," Abbott said.

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, included in his HB 1 a \$10,500-per-child education savings account that prioritizes low-income students and those with disabilities. The bill would also, in part, raise per-student funding by \$540, from \$6,160 to \$6,700; create inflation-based raises for teachers; and create a teacher retention program.

Buckley is chairman of the House Public Education Committee.

As it exists now, Abbott supports HB 1, the governor said Friday.

"The Senate really wants to see this legislation passed, and they will work collaboratively with the House to make sure that it reaches my desk," Abbott said.

On Thursday, the Senate also swiftly passed its own versions of school choice and education funding legislation. Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, ushered Senate Bills 1 and 2 through rushed committee hearings and speedy floor sessions.

SB 1 would create a \$500 million school choice program, giving each eligible student \$8,000. SB 2 would invest \$5.2 billion in teacher pay increases and funding for schools.

The bills are almost identical to bills Creighton filed during the regular and third special sessions.

The House committee on Friday also passed HB 2 to create a fund to give schools safety-related grants annually.

Each year, the state could give out up to \$1.1 billion, according to the bill, authored by Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian. Districts could get between \$50,000 and \$200,000 per campus, depending on enrollment, for physical safety improvements, such as fencing or cameras, and mental health resources for students.

How the House education committee voted on HB 1

For: Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen; Rep. Trent Ashby, R-Lufkin; Rep. Keith Bell, R-Forney; Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls; Rep. Cody Harris, R-Palestine; Rep. Cole Hefner, R-Mount Pleasant; Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian; Rep. Will Metcalf, R-Conroe; Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano; Rep. Gary VanDeaver, R-New Boston

Against: Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins, D-San Antonio; Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston; Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin; Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin

Absent: Rep. Oscar Longoria, D-Mission

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