

Star-Telegram

As lawmakers return to Austin this week, a heap of work awaits

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AUSTIN -- A Legislature brimming with new faces will start work this week on a cascade of problems in the nation's second-largest state, including a looming water shortage, an overburdened transportation network and a much-criticized school finance system now under scrutiny in the courts.

Both chambers of the 83rd Texas Legislature will be gavelled to order at noon Tuesday to begin a 140-day session that will cover scores of issues, from gambling to school vouchers.

Shortly after being sworn in, House members will choose their leader for the next two years. Republican House Speaker Joe Straus of San Antonio, who faces a challenge from Tea Party-backed Rep. David Simpson, R-Longview, is heavily favored to be elected to a third term.

A much-anticipated prelude to the session comes Monday, when Texas Comptroller Susan Combs releases general revenue estimates that will determine how much lawmakers have available to spend as they write a budget to run state government over the next two years.

An improving economy has brightened the budget outlook since the 2011 session, when lawmakers started work against a projected shortfall of \$27 billion in the aftermath of a national recession. In contrast, state revenue this year could exceed original projections by up to \$8 billion.

Nevertheless, many experts say, lawmakers will be hard-pressed to meet the spending demands of a fast-growing state as they try to produce a blueprint for the 2014-15 fiscal biennium, which starts Sept. 1.

Writing a budget is the Legislature's fundamental task.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities, an Austin think tank that advocates for low-income Texans, says lawmakers would need to spend \$108 billion in general revenue -- well above a constitutionally mandated cap -- to restore state services that were cut in the previous two sessions.

"Obviously the budget is always a priority and it will be this time around," said former lawmaker Talmadge Heflin of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, another Austin-based think tank that promotes free enterprise and personal liberties.

Government, business and civic leaders in Tarrant County are pushing an array of priorities, including the revival of an effort to win legislative approval of an M.D. program for the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine at the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth. Proponents introduced the initiative in the 2011 session but were unsuccessful.

The makeup of the 150-member House and the 31-member Senate -- as well as the legislative delegation from Tarrant County -- has been reshaped by the 2012 elections.

Republicans still control both chambers, the governor's office and all other statewide offices.

But they lost the two-thirds House majority that enabled them to prevail on nearly all major issues.

This year, the breakdown in the House is 95 Republicans and 55 Democrats, and nearly a third are new arrivals.

When the session opens Tuesday, there will be 41 freshmen, as well as three former members who made political comebacks in last year's elections.

Counting 25 members who will be in their second term, much of the House is made up of freshmen or sophomores who -- depending on the perspective -- could collectively be faulted for lacking experience or praised for offering a fresh outlook and new ideas.

Tarrant County's Republican freshmen won election with heavy Tea Party backing and are expected to be part of a strongly conservative tide in the Legislature.

But Rep.-elect Jonathan Stickland, R-Hurst, said his immediate goal is to learn the ropes and pass legislation.

"I'm trying not to get too wrapped up in some of the political stuff," he said. "Right now, I'm just focused on making a lot of friends, trying not to make any enemies, and talking to people about my legislative agenda and building coalitions."

Rep. Lon Burnam, D-Fort Worth, often described as one of the more liberal members, is dean of the delegation and ranks 20th in overall House seniority after 16 years in the Legislature.

A high-profile returning lawmaker on the Republican side is Rep. Charlie Geren of Fort Worth, who is a top member of Straus' leadership team.

"There's a Democratic Party, there's a Tea Party, and there's a mainstream Republican Party," Burnam said in describing the political makeup of the House.

Besides churning out new laws affecting the lives of more than 26 million Texans, the 83rd Legislature will effectively lay the political groundwork for the next round of state elections in 2014.

Gov. Rick Perry, who is contemplating running for re-election next year, is expected to use the session to shore up his political stature after a failed presidential bid in 2012.

Perry began outlining his legislative priorities with a five-part Texas Budget Compact that recycles his long-standing opposition to new or increased taxes.

Perry will spell out his priorities in a state-of-the-state address this month and could also present a list of emergency items that would call for accelerated action by lawmakers.

The state's longest-serving governor has acknowledged that he may seek an unprecedented fourth term next year and plans to announce his decision in June, after the Legislature adjourns.

He is also considering another presidential run in 2016.

This year's budget battle will begin taking shape as early as next week when the Legislative Budget Board releases draft recommendations that will serve as the starting point for the final budget document late in the session.

One big-ticket item demanding quick attention from lawmakers is \$4.7 billion in Medicaid funding that was put off from the last session and will come due in March. Lawmakers are expected to approve a supplemental appropriation bill to deal with the issue.

School funding

Education funding is expected to once again be one of the biggest issues.

Many lawmakers, particularly Democrats, are calling for a restoration of \$5.4 billion that was cut from state education assistance.

More than two-thirds of the state's school districts are engaged in a lawsuit challenging the school finance system.

A trial is under way in an Austin district court, but the ruling will likely be appealed to the Texas Supreme Court. So the legal action is unlikely to be resolved before the Legislature adjourns May 27.

The case's outcome could result in a special legislative session.

Months of drought and dwindling water supplies have prompted many lawmakers to put water at the top of their priority list to meet the demands of a growing population.

A wide range of lawmakers and interested groups -- including the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce -- are calling for full funding of a state water plan to help finance a multifaceted strategy to provide adequate water in Texas through 2060.

The projected cost is \$53 billion, including \$27 billion in state assistance. In 16 North Texas counties anchored by the Metroplex, water demands are expected to increase by 86 percent while the region's population doubles from 6.6 million to 13 million, according to the plan.

Lawmakers in both urban and rural areas are clamoring for more transportation funds to help ease congestion in cities and repair neglected roads and bridges in outlying sections of the state.

A commission assembled by Perry has called for a total investment of \$315 billion to improve the state's transportation network through 2030.

Army of lobbyists

Over the next 20 weeks, the pink-domed Capitol will teem with activity as people representing seemingly every interest -- bikers, students, Panhandle farmers, housewives and the homeless -- descend to join well-paid professional lobbyists in presenting their cases to lawmakers.

More than 700 people were registered as lobbyists for the 2013 session late last week, according to the Texas Ethics Commission, and the number is expected to top 1,800 before the session ends.

Among the issues awaiting lawmakers are renewed calls for casino gambling and a proposal left over from 2011 to make it a crime for airport security personnel to conduct invasive pat-downs.

Democratic lawmakers have also vowed to resist a push from the Republican leadership to authorize tax-funded vouchers that would help parents pay for sending their children to private schools.

Dave Montgomery is the Star-Telegram's Austin bureau chief.

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