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Editorial: A letter to freshman lawmakers

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Dear Freshman Lawmakers,

Congratulations and condolences.

Today you finally take the oath of office in the state Capitol, joining 180 other lawmakers for the Texas Legislature's 83rd session. Getting there has been a hard slog for most of you, so job well done.

Condolences, though, on your new office — the one at the end of the hall on the lowest level of the underground Capitol Extension. Perks come with seniority, and you'll have to stick it out for a decade or two if you want digs near a grand staircase.

Condolences also on the low expectations that Capitol veterans have for you. They may be flashing you smiles and laying on good wishes, but they've got you sized up as years away from figuring out how the game is played in Austin.

That's where you can turn the tables on the old guard. You may be raw rookies, but you have strength in numbers — the largest freshman class in decades, 40 in the 150-member House alone. Add that to a pile of sophomores, and the Capitol is awash in newcomers.



This is a perfect session to insist on a new set of playing rules, one that doesn't tolerate sleight of hand to get the public's bills paid.

Veteran politicians will remind you that your first order of business is paying a multibillion-dollar IOU left over from the last legislative session for Medicaid bills. Exactly how much do you appreciate that? Do you have the spine to buck leaders who are prone to budget tricks? Your constituents hope so.

That would mean spending taxes and fees on the reason they're collected, like electricity surcharges meant to help seniors and poor people pay their bills, specialty license-plate fees meant to help specific causes, and the gasoline tax, meant to build highways. It breaks faith with taxpayers to sit on this money to balance the books or to divert it elsewhere.

The granddaddy of all diversions — more than \$1 billion in motor fuels taxes poured into the general fund by the 2011 Legislature — sets back highway construction and forces metro areas like Dallas-Fort Worth to slap tolls on major new roadways to get them built. Tolls have become de facto transportation taxes, run up on your constituents' credit cards, courtesy of gamesmanship in the Capitol.

How about a freshman insurrection that insists on square dealing with the public's money?

House Speaker Joe Straus, assuming members re-elect him, has called for a "serious" session that addresses the state's basics: financing for long-range water needs, modern roadways, quality public education, affordable college, just for starters.

It's an ambitious agenda, and it's a good one. Achieving it will take focus before the final gavel in 140 days, and it will take a combination of guts and ingenuity to come up with money to pay for it.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul is no longer acceptable. That's legislative larceny.

Anyway, you better get after it, and you can count on us for a gut check from time to time.

Sincerely,

Your cautiously optimistic constituents



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