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Texas House increasing budget scrutiny

JOE STRAUS, FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS : AUGUST 19, 2014 : Updated: August 19, 2014 5:11pm

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Texas House Speaker Joe Straus is a San Antonio Republican.

The **Texas House** knows how to cut taxes and balance budgets. During my time as speaker of the House, we have reduced taxes on consumers and businesses alike, delivering more than \$1 billion in relief when we met last year. Meanwhile, the Texas private sector is creating jobs nearly twice as fast as the rest of the country.

But there's more to responsible stewardship

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than tax relief. It's also important to use resources in a way that is efficient and transparent. Like any consumers, taxpayers rightfully expect value for their money. And in the Texas House, we have taken a number of steps to deliver it.

Texas continues to have one of the lowest per-capita spending rates of any state in the country. Last year, we passed a balanced budget that kept spending beneath expected growth in population and inflation. But as we prepare for the Legislature to convene again in January, we need to know that the agencies receiving taxpayer dollars are using them in the best possible ways to support their mission.

Last week, I announced a new process called Strategic Fiscal Review. House budget writers will put some important state agencies under the microscope and ask fundamental questions about what those agencies are trying to achieve. This is a significant change, and such changes do not happen overnight. That's why I've identified a handful of important, visible agencies — such as the **Texas Department of Transportation** and the **Department of Public Safety** — to undergo this first round of review. The lessons we learn will help us apply similar scrutiny to other agencies going forward.

The Strategic Fiscal Review process will increase efficiency. But it's only one of several efforts the House is making to improve how government operates.

Earlier this year, I named a committee to review the effectiveness of programs that offer incentives to businesses looking to create jobs in Texas. At a hearing last week in North Texas, the committee asked a number of necessary — if at times uncomfortable — questions about one of those programs, the **Emerging Technology Fund**. While these programs can undoubtedly benefit the state, the House wants to know whether they are worth the investment that taxpayers make in them. I expect the Legislature to have a healthy debate over the next year about whether these programs should be renewed, retooled or replaced, and I look forward to hearing the committee's recommendations.

Finally, the House is continuing to untangle the knot that parts of our state budget have been twisted into. For more than two decades, the state increasingly assessed taxes and fees for a stated purpose — state parks or trauma care, for instance — but allowed that money to pile up unspent so that it could be counted to certify the state budget. The House reversed that trend in a major way last year by using more dollars as intended while eliminating some taxes and fees.

When the House unveils a proposed two-year state budget in January, we will take the next step by using all of the money in the **State Highway Fund** for transportation. For decades, some of this money has been used for other purposes, such as funding the Department of Public Safety. But using those dollars — which come largely from the gas tax — for transportation alone will increase transparency in our budget and provide an additional \$1.3 billion over two years to improve mobility. And we won't have to increase taxes to do it.

Government should be limited, but it should also be effective. And by getting more value out of every dollar, we can make sure that our most important priorities — such as public schools and our colleges and universities — have the resources they need to fulfill their missions and help continue our economic success. I will keep working with legislators from both parties to achieve these goals and to find new ways to build a better, smarter, more responsive state government.

Republican **Joe Straus** represents part of Bexar County in the Texas House, where he also serves as Speaker.

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