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Abbott wields veto pen to trim nearly \$300 million from Texas budget



Robert T. Garrett  

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About this Blog

The blog for the Dallas Morning News politics team tracks Dallas Fort Worth area, Texas and national campaigns.



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, center, looks over towards Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, far left, after asking for the date, before signing House Bill 32, franchise tax cut, during a bill signing ceremony held at Advance Micro Devices in Austin, Texas, on Monday, June 15, 2015. (Rodolfo Gonzalez/Austin American-Statesman)

Update at 10:54 p.m.: Have added an estimate of the “fluff” in Abbott’s claim that he cut “almost \$295 million” from the budget. About \$75 million of that was spending that wasn’t going to happen because “contingency” bills died.

Original item at 8:51 p.m.: AUSTIN — Gov. Greg Abbott has cut nearly \$300 million from the two-year state budget, he announced Saturday.



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Wielding his line-item veto, Abbott eliminated about \$190 million of borrowing to replace a San Antonio state office building and construct a headquarters for the Department of Motor Vehicles in Austin.

Abbott also cancelled a new parking garage for a Houston state office building, saving \$26 million.

The three capital construction projects weren't well thought-out, Abbott said in his veto message. However, he said he's willing to re-examine the need for them before the 2017 legislative session.

Abbott also appealed to his GOP base by cancelling the Texas Education Agency's membership dues in an educational organization he said supports "Common Core," a set of educational standards promoted by national groups representing governors and state school officers.

"The federal government should not determine what is taught in Texas classrooms, and Texas taxpayer dollars should not be used to finance the promotion of Common Core. I therefore object," Abbott said as he deleted \$193,000 a year in dues paid to the Southern Regional Education Board.

Abbott also vetoed \$5 million for an identity theft prevention center at the University of Texas at Austin and about \$3.5 million in special projects at four other state colleges that he said were dubious. If they're important, the schools can pay for them out of their own funds, Abbott said.

A big chunk of the savings Abbott claimed came from striking out budget language that was already irrelevant. The proposed spending — nearly \$75 million — died when bills authorizing it died. In one case, a worker's compensation matter, Abbott vetoed the bill needed to spend the \$200,000.

But he approved more than 99.7 percent of lawmakers' proposed spending in the budget they sent him. As it arrived on Abbott's desk, the budget would have spent \$209.4 billion, including federal funds.

"I am proud to sign a Texas budget that cuts taxes, provides a record amount of funding to secure the border, improves our schools and builds more roads," Abbott said in a statement. "This budget proves that government can control its spending while ensuring the essential needs of its citizens are met."

On Monday, Abbott signed into law a tax-cut package that will provide \$3.8 billion of relief over the next two years for businesses and homeowners. It also repealed \$250 million of fees that 16 classes of professionals would have had to pay in the next budget cycle.

The budget he signed on Saturday provides \$1.5 billion more for public schools, after covering the costs of increasing enrollments. It increases state support of higher education by adding \$1.1 billion to a formula-funding system. It spends \$800 million to ramp up state and local law enforcement activity, and extend the stay of Texas National Guard soldiers, along the Texas-Mexico border.

The budget also waves at fixing state-owned buildings that have fallen into disrepair and two large public employee pension funds, though most lawmakers agreed that much work remains.

It stops a so-called "diversion" of road fund money — \$1.3 billion for state troopers and their fringe benefits. The money instead is drawn from general-purpose state revenue.

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However, a big shift of existing sales-tax dollars to transportation will not occur until 2018 at the earliest. On Nov. 2, voters will be asked to approve a constitutional amendment shifting the money from the general budget to roads.

To reduce turnover among prison guards, the budget gives them an 8-percent pay raise. To keep medical school graduates in Texas, it spends \$53 million to make sure there is an in-state residency slot available for each. It also frees up more money to be spent for the original purposes, such as hospital trauma care and state parks.

Advocates for more spending on education and health care, though, have criticized the tax cuts and the proposed shifts of existing tax dollars to roads as possibly blowing a 2011-style hole in the state budget written next session. The general budget that funds prison, universities, Medicaid and public schools could have between \$13 billion and \$14 billion less in discretionary funds because of this year's actions, said members of Texas Forward, a coalition of mostly progressive groups that supports raising more revenue.

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