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Editorial: Meat and potatoes from Perry

Published: 29 January 2013 10:06 PM

It's a given: We'll take meat and potatoes over the indigestion of divisive issues from the governor's State of the State address any day.

Aside from a brief pep rally for a tax cut — complete with a standing O from delirious lawmakers — Gov. Rick Perry delivered essentially a basic, cautious and familiar menu of objectives for the 2013 Legislature.

Legislative leaders have called for a focused session to take care of public education, higher ed, roads and water needs. Perry didn't distract from that focus and offered his own ideas on achieving the goals. Call that progress.

Mercifully missing were guaranteed hot-button issues from two years ago, like Perry's call for emergency status for bills requiring photo ID for voting, sonograms before abortions and a ban on the ill-defined "sanctuary cities."

Perry played it safer than that, probably an outgrowth of having come off the presidential campaign trail a loser for the first time in his long political life. In the evitable nod to political realities, he did unabashedly proclaim Texas a success, period, as with, "The state of the state is stronger than ever."

OK, yes, for many Texans things are swell, and the state's healthy job creation numbers attest to policies that work. But voters send lawmakers to Austin not to high-five their successes but to shore up the weak spots. And those are many.

Two years ago, lawmakers whacked \$5.4 billion from public schools, and educators have been pressed to do more with less. Nowhere did Perry indicate what portion of that money should be restored, yet he put out the promise of \$1.8 billion in tax relief as a "good place to start." (Cue the applause.)

A better place to start is establishing the right number of dollars for schools and other basic needs, then talk about returning money to taxpayers. First things first.

It was good to hear Perry join the call for setting aside money from the rainy day fund — he said \$3.7 billion — for a new borrowing pool for highway and water projects. That won't meet longer-term roadway needs, though, and Perry's solution is to break the Legislature of its habit of diverting motor-fuel taxes into nonroadway uses. That, too, is a grand idea, but it has a price tag that nobody's figured out how to cover.

One other place that Texas isn't stronger than ever is among the 1 in 4 people without health insurance, yet Perry says he refuses to budge "one iota" on meeting Washington's dictates on expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

That would come at too high a price, he insisted. Unhealthy Texans exact an unacceptably high price, too, and treating them in hospitals is the most expensive option out there. Access to health care in Texas remains too restricted, no matter how eager we may be to crow about our economic model.

Rick Perry's seventh State of the State

Best parts

- Focus on the Legislature's basics of water, roads, schools and higher education
- Absence of hot-button issues like immigration, guns and abortion
- Insistence on transparent budgeting and using taxes for the reason they're collected

Weaknesses

- Failure to address what money should be restored to public schools from last session
- No clear financial plan for dealing with the state's long-term transportation needs
- Standing pat on bucking the White House on health care reforms, without specific alternatives



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