

## Budget's extra billions targeted

### Groups say needs ignored

By Matthew Waller Scripps Texas New papers

Monday, March 25, 2013

AUSTIN — The state has been hoarding billions of dollars to balance the state budget, and lawmakers considered bills in a hearing Monday to help end the practice.

Representatives for environmental and medical groups, however, stressed needs for money that could come from the special-purpose accounts where the money sits.

“This may be the single most important that thing we do in this committee,” said state Rep. Myra Crownover, R-Denton, the chairwoman for a House appropriations subcommittee on budget transparency and reform. “The continued use of dedicated funds for any reason other than their intended purpose has led to a justifiable sense of mistrust between the legislator and the voters. This problem was not created by this Legislature, but it is ours to deal with.”

State Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo, has House Bill 7 that would reduce the amount of specific-purpose fees and taxes collected for accounts but allow more spending uses out of those accounts, meaning there would be less money going into the accounts but more money going out of the accounts to bring down the current massive totals that have accumulated.

The bill also allows for regular examination of those accounts to see if the funding in them is necessary.

There is nearly \$5 billion in multiple funds sitting unused as a budget balancing device, according to state comptroller records.

Those fees and taxes include money that would go to state parks or money that would go to help impoverished families pay for electric utilities, but which instead often sit idle.

State Rep. John Otto, R-Dayton, has House Bill 6 that would not let the comptroller use more than \$4.8 billion in the special accounts to balance the budget. If at the end of the legislative session the lawmakers have chosen to spend less than \$4.8 billion out of the special accounts, lawmakers would only let the comptroller use the lesser number to balance the budget.

Darby's bill aroused concern from environmental groups, since one of the funds that

works to reduce car pollution would diminish. The Texas Department of Transportation wouldn't have to give dedicated money to the Texas Emissions Reduction Plan, according to a state fiscal analysis of the bill.

"We believe we should fully appropriate the \$180 million a year that TERP raises for its intended purposes," given that cities such as Dallas and Houston already are not meeting some air quality standards, and that more may follow, said Cyrus Reed, the acting director of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Medical groups also raised concerns.

"We want to make sure that it's noted that there is still a need for additional dollars to the trauma system," said Texas EMS Trauma & Acute Care Foundation CEO Dinah Welsh about the Dedicated Designated Trauma Facility and Emergency Medical Services Account.

She said about \$420 million had been distributed since 2003, but since that time, there has been about \$2 billion in needs because of uncompensated care.

G.K. Sprinkle, representing the Texas Ambulance Association, re-emphasized the continuing need in her organization's arena.

"You're expecting that if you have an emergency, that there will be an EMS ambulance to come out and take you, and if we don't look to support this through more moneys in the various ways that they can be given, such as through the trauma and EMS fund, they won't be there when you need them," Sprinkle said.

Matthew Waller covers the Legislature for Scripps Texas Newspapers and works in Austin. Contact him at [mwaller@gosanangelo.com](mailto:mwaller@gosanangelo.com) or via Twitter @waller\_matthew.



© 2013 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online