

Legislature preps to face challenges

Surplus encourages area legislators

By Raquel C. Garza / Reporter-News Staff Writer
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Area representatives are looking forward to a positive 140 days as the 79th Texas Legislature convened Tuesday with the expectation of a \$400 million budget surplus rather than the \$10 billion shortfall that lawmakers faced two years ago.

"I think it's going to be a very positive, very exciting session," said Rep. Jim Keffer, R-Eastland. "It's not going to be a boring year around here. We've got a lot of things to look at, some tough issues. But I think we have the talent and the wisdom to get them resolved."

Gov. Rick Perry designated reform of Adult Protective Services and Child Protective Services and education legislation as emergency items for the 2005 legislative session on Monday.

Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn also announced revenue estimates for 2006-2007 on Monday. The estimate projects a \$400 million surplus - as opposed to the expected \$1 billion to \$2 billion shortfall - giving legislators some flexibility with appropriation legislation.

The news encouraged Big Country legislators.

"The surplus definitely makes things a lot more positive than starting out with a \$10 billion deficit," Keffer said, referring to the deficit lawmakers faced two years ago, at the beginning of the 78th Legislature.

However, Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay, remains cautious about the extra money in the budget.

"The surplus is good news," he said. "The bad news is we have a lot of demands on the money available."

CPS and APS reform would require the hiring of new employees, he said. The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which insures Texas' underprivileged youth, faced cuts during the last legislative session. Medicaid costs have also increased.

"Even though there's a surplus, there are a lot of agencies standing in line," Fraser said.

Aside from the emergency issues facing the legislature, area representatives hope to address water issues, workers' compensation reform and restructuring the tax system to pay for public education.

Getting these tasks accomplished should be much easier, given the

friendlier mood now that redistricting has been settled, said Rep. Bob Hunter, R-Abilene.

"With redistricting behind us, I think that's going to enable us to move on with other things," he said. "A lot of progress will be made in the first 60 days."

Redistricting customarily takes place every 10 years, after the U.S. Census has been conducted. Its purpose is redraw district lines based on population to ensure voters are represented fairly.

In 2004, the Legislature, controlled by Republicans, redrew congressional district lines, putting Democratic incumbent Rep. Charlie Stenholm of Abilene and Republican incumbent Rep. Randy Neugebauer of Lubbock in the same district. The two ran against one another in the November election. Neugebauer won.

Hunter said he hopes the state also will look at raises for state employees.

"They're doing a great job, but they've gone without a pay increase for the last four to six years," he said. "I think we've got to look at raises for people working not only in our prison systems, but at all levels of government."

As always, constituent involvement plays a big part in letting representatives know which issues are most important to residents in their district, said Keffer, who encouraged members of his district to correspond with his office.

"Stay tuned," Keffer said. "It's going to be a very important session with a lot of issues that are going to affect our part of the world."

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