Healthy Finances to Greet 84th Regular Session

Whatever the results of the November elections for seats in the Texas Legislature, the state financial outlook will be robust compared to previous Sessions. House and Senate budget writers will use the latest estimate of projected revenues for the next biennium (2016-17) from the Comptroller of Public Accounts during the Regular Session, which convenes in January. “Available revenue” is a strong predictor of appropriations, absent tax cuts or shifts in policy priorities. One wild card to watch closely is pending litigation over public school funding.

Many observers credit the booming oil and gas industry for driving the healthy economy in Texas, plus an overall—albeit slow—recovery nationwide from the disastrous recession that began in 2008. The revenue picture is certainly good news for community and technical colleges, based on Student Success Points.

A New Slate of Leaders

Whatever happens in the November elections, the legislative landscape will look very different when the Regular Session convenes in January.

First of all, we will have a new governor—either Attorney General Greg Abbott or Sen. Wendy Davis (D-Fort Worth). Most media prognosticators are betting on Gen. Abbott, partly because we haven’t had a Democrat in statewide office in two decades. However, you can expect a well-funded and interesting race. Some analysts believe Texas is poised (due to demographic factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity) to turn from “red” to “purple.”

Because of the defeat of Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst by Sen. Dan Patrick (R-Houston) in the Republican primary run-off, this office will change hands as well. Sen. Patrick’s opponent is Sen. Leticia Van de Putte (D-San Antonio). The Lieutenant Governor presides over the Senate, with formidable powers over legislation in that chamber.

Two other changes are noteworthy in the Senate. First, as noted earlier, is the departure of Sen. Robert Duncan (R-Lubbock), who chaired the important Committee on State Affairs. Second is the appointment (unless something very unexpected happens) of Sen. Jane Nelson (R-Flower Mound) to become the chair of the Committee on Finance. She replaces former chair Sen. Tommy Williams (R-The Woodlands), who resigned his Senate seat months ago to take a position with Texas A&M University. As for the House, the most

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What You Can Do
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Now that the primary races are over, we need to be thinking about the most effective way to advance our priorities. After the November elections, successful candidates will start filing bills for the Regular Session, which will begin in January.

Due to a 2013 compromise, state budget writers and community colleges will probably not endure another round of “proportionality” debates when it comes to health benefits for community college educators under the Group Benefits Program. However, we can expect plenty of benefits-related funding difficulties when the Legislature meets to assess the revenue picture for the next biennium.

The general economic outlook for the future is mixed. On the one hand, the state’s economy is robust, with sales tax revenues and property values increasing. The boom in the energy industry is an important part of this story. However, public education and Medicaid will continue to consume an increasing share of resources. Regarding the former, we’ll want to keep a close eye on the abundant suits aimed at equitable funding.

When visiting with members, I am asked, “What can I do?”—especially before the Session begins. First, join TCCTA. Your association is respected in Austin, and policy makers pay attention when your professional voices speak in unison, from every campus—and legislative district—in Texas. Next, get informed. Pay attention to our communications and contribute to the discussion on the TCCTA Blog.

Third, get to know your legislators now, while they are “at home.” Invite your representative and senator to visit your campus, ideally in a joint meeting with faculty, administration, and board members. It’s always impressive when all stakeholders are on the same page.

Finally, participate in TCCTA events—especially the Fall Conference for Faculty Leaders and the Annual Convention. I hope to see you there!
significant change for you and your campus colleagues will be a new chair of the Committee on Higher Education. Rep. Dan Branch (R-Dallas) resigned from the Legislature to run an unsuccessful campaign for Attorney General. Rep. Branch was instrumental in the passage of outcomes-based funding for community colleges in 2013.

Eyes on the Senate

While it’s too soon to speculate broadly, as legislative races won’t conclude until November, the Texas Senate will be a different chamber in 2015. Most importantly, since Sen. Dan Patrick (R-Houston) defeated incumbent Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst in the run-off primary, we will have a new presiding officer in the Senate.

Sen. Patrick will face Sen. Leticia Van de Putte (D-San Antonio) in November.

If media prognosticators are correct, the Senate will take a hard turn to the right. For community and technical college educators, this may mean state revenues will be harder to come by. Some reporters are predicting gridlock between the House and Senate over the budget and public education. Sen. Patrick has been a consistent advocate for public funds to be used for private schools. Educational vouchers, which would allow the passage of outcomes-based funding for community colleges in 2013.

In particular the so-called two-thirds rule in the Senate, which prevented the bills from reaching the floor. Some Capitol observers have speculated that, under Sen. Patrick’s leadership, this rule may be scrapped.

TCCTA has asked consistently that, if changes are to be made in current law, institutions be allowed to decide for themselves whether to allow concealed weapons in campus facilities. Some colleges do not have the resources to provide for armed security.

Despite well-publicized tragedies, campus violence remains extremely rare. Previous testimony indicates that licensed carriers of concealed weapons in Texas almost never commit crimes. However, witnesses from law enforcement agencies have testified that, in a chaotic situation, they worry about instantly discerning a violent perpetrator from a licensed carrier.

A movement also exists nationwide to allow “open carry” of firearms in all public places.

Benefits Picture May Stabilize

Over the years, community college educators have grown accustomed to uncertainty regarding their health and retirement benefits. While the health plans administered by the Employees Retirement System, and the retirement programs with TRS and ORP, are still subject to rate increases and other adjustments, the long and acrimonious debate over “proportionality” has apparently been put to rest.

In 2013, a compromise was worked out between community college leaders and legislative budget writers, regarding the state’s obligation to fund health and retirement benefits for two-year college educators. Starting with the current biennium (2014-15)—absent legislative changes in future Sessions—the state will provide 50 percent of the funds necessary to cover the cost of retirement and health benefits.

One caveat: The lawmaker most responsible for this agreement was Sen. Robert Duncan (R-Lubbock), who has resigned his seat to become chancellor of the Texas Tech University system. Sen. Duncan’s absence will be felt dearly, particularly in the Senate.

There is no indication at this point that lawmakers intend to revisit proportionality, but some in both chambers hope to privatize benefits programs, as part of a national movement to reduce the government’s role in employee benefits. The agenda is driven by influential organizations, with Texas at the forefront. This issue must be watched carefully, as we approach the next Regular Session.

Get Connected!

In these extraordinary times, members are urged to visit the TCCTA web site frequently.

The home page contains information on important and timely subjects, both in the Texas Legislature and around the country. Developments from the Coordinating Board will be posted here, as well as any news regarding Social Security in Congress.

Also on the home page is the Blog, which features current events from the Capitol, calls for action by members, headlines on teaching techniques, and news summaries from a host of journalistic and professional sources.

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