

The Texas Legislative Session – How Can You Advocate for Change?

Texas Legislative Sessions 101

- When they meet - every odd numbered year, mid-January to May 31 plus special sessions called between regular sessions
- Currently in the 2021 legislative session
 - Bill filing until mid-March; the Legislature can't pass bills in the first 60 days unless the Governor designates a topic as an emergency item. Governor Abbott's emergency items announced in his State of the State Speech were:
 - expanding broadband internet access,
 - punishing local governments that “defund the police” as he defines it,
 - changing the bail system to prevent dangerous criminals from making bail,
 - ensuring what he described as “election integrity”, and
 - providing civil liability protections for businesses that were open during the pandemic.
 - These priorities were also highlighted in a budget proposal sent to the Legislature which was prepared by the Governor.
 - Not designated as emergency items, but the Governor also said he wants the legislature to further restrict abortion and make Texas a “Second Amendment sanctuary state” by keeping “any government office anywhere” from infringing on Texans' gun rights.
 - The Governor has also said that the state will follow every letter of the requirements set by the federal court relating to the foster care system. This may have ramifications on the budget and other bills.
 - The Legislature is not required to act on items the Governor names, but his voice has political power,
 - Most committee work starts in March
 - Regular sessions begin in mid-March
 - The Committee on Redistricting and the Senate Appropriations Committee have already started work
- The Republican party controls both the Legislature and the Senate, so it is a challenge to get many progressive bills passed, but perhaps we can help prevent some of the worst bills or worst aspects of bills.

High Level Overview of Major Issues that May Be Addressed in this Legislative Session

- The State Budget including School Finance.
 - The budget is the only item required to be passed by the legislature before the end of the legislative session. It covers 2 years. The first estimate on the budget is that expected revenues are about \$1 billion short of proposed expenditures due to reduced sales tax revenue resulting in large part to the pandemic and to the slump in oil prices.
 - The deficit is not worse than that because the state kept most of the federal pandemic relief funds rather than passing them down to schools, cities and counties.

- In addition to provisions to cut some proposed expenditures, the legislature may look at tax increases to make up the shortfall.
- School financing needs have increased due to lower enrollment, costs of on-line classes, and Covid-19 cleaning and safety remodeling costs.
- Higher education institutions have suffered due to the same reasons as public schools plus many have endowments that have significant investments in oil and gas which have been hard hit.
- Redistricting – this happens every 10 years and this is the year! Most of the work is done in closed meetings. There are a few public hearings, that will all be virtual this year. Texas will add two or three new districts once the census information is made available. Representatives will want to protect their one seats and figure out how to draw the new districts. It is likely that the new map will be challenged in court. Since release of the census information is delayed, the redistricting vote will have to be done in a special session but hearings are happening during the session.
- Voting - There are bills on Voter Registration, Access to Mail-in Ballots, Preventing Voter Registration Purges, Voter Intimidation but also bills on Election Security and Integrity measures – In other words, bills have been introduced to expand access and others have been introduced to make it harder to register and/or to vote.
- Healthcare – Issues include:
 - State versus Local Control of Pandemic Restrictions and Vaccinations
 - Access to healthcare
 - Texas has more uninsured residents than any other state, largely because Texas opted not to expand Medicaid in connection with the Affordable Care Act. Medicaid expansion would have provided coverage for millions of low-income residents.
 - Abortion rights or restrictions
 - State Financial Support for Hospitals
 - The state support is to pay for uncompensated care (i.e., uninsured patients).
 - If Texas had expanded Medicare, 90% of the cost would have been paid by the federal government. (It's still possible for the state to expand Medicaid and a bill has been introduced to do this.)
 - More insured patients would mean less financial support from the state would be needed for hospitals.
 - See <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/coalition-letter-in-support-of-the-expanded-medicare-program-to-state-legislators/> for more information.
- Policing and racial justice
 - George Floyd Act filed by the Texas Legislative Black Caucus Restrictions to prevent choke holds and require other officers to intervene when an officer is using excessive force – and other bills to restrict police actions. In contrast, the Governor wants to expand the rights of police officers to protect themselves from harm.

- Allowing local control of police department budgets to reallocate funds to training, mental health or other services to respond to calls when appropriate versus calling these actions “defund” the police – and imposing property tax limitations or other financial penalties for cities who take such actions
- Other possible bills would seek to
 - Demilitarize police forces or
 - Curtail the power of police unions that make it hard to fire or discipline officers who use excessive force
- Criminal Justice System Reform – possible bills would see to
 - Change sentencing guidelines to prevent excessive sentences for minor crimes resulting in mass incarceration of non-violent criminals.
 - Put limits on the ability of police to arrest people charged with minor misdemeanors.
 - Improve conditions in prisons to reduce spread of communicable diseases
 - Restrict on the use of solitary confinement
 - Restrict use of jail time for inability to pay fines or make bail
 - Decriminalize juvenile curfew violations
 - Improve/monitor prison conditions
 - Increase mental health services for prisoners

How to Find Out What’s Going On

- Texas Legislature Online – <https://capitol.texas.gov/> - a neutral source of information about the Texas Legislature. This site is the governmental site that provides a wealth of information about the legislative process, bills that are introduced, and what is happening on all bills.
- Texas Impact - <https://texasimpact.org/> - This is an inner-faith organization based in Austin that has a legislative agenda on which the organization’s members agree. Father Paul is on the board. See its legislative platform at <https://texasimpact.org/2021-2022-legislative-platform/> Texas Impact also has Legislative Engagement Groups on a variety of areas of interest: civil rights, climate and energy, criminal justice, health, human services, hunger and poverty, immigration, public education, religious freedom, and budget/revenue. It also posts a Weekly Witness webcast on YouTube.
- Progress Texas – <https://progresstexas.org/>. This is an organization that represents progressive views. It takes positions and sends out emails about issues. The website also compiles a list of bills Progress Texas is watching at <https://progresstexas.org/blog/bills-we%E2%80%99re-watching-2021-texas-legislative-session> and includes thumbnail sketches about the bills. The bills are listed under subject matters and are rated “good”, “bad” or “ugly” from a progressive perspective.
- Texas Civil Rights Project - <https://txcivilrights.org/#> This organization has a Texas and federal focus on areas of civil rights including criminal justice reform, voting rights, and racial and economic justice. It has a number of action topics in these major focus areas. It is mainly focused on legal advocacy and litigation, but its website and action areas include information that may be of interest.

- Texas Values Action – <https://txvaluesaction.org/>. This is a religious right organization that takes positions on bills and has a website that lists legislative priorities from a religious right perspective. It also sends out action alerts.
- Episcopal Public Policy Network – <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations/eppn-sign-up/> This is a grassroots network of Episcopalians across the country dedicated to carrying out the Baptismal Covenant call to “strive for justice and peace” through the active ministry of public policy. It sends out alerts and takes positions on a variety of issues, mainly at the national level.

How to Find My Representatives

- State and Federal <https://wrm.capital.texas.gov/home>
- Includes Federal, State, County, and City elected positions <https://www.dallascountyvotes.org/elected-officials/elected-officials/> Click on “Who Represents Me” button and you get a list of who represents you and then you can click on them to get more information. You can also select your county to get county representation information.
- Find out what Committees your Texas legislature representatives are on or who is on which committees (House, Senate or Joint) here: <https://capitol.texas.gov/Committees/Membership.aspx> .

Where to Get Training

- Texas Impact training: Advocacy 101 – FREE training on how to set up a Twitter account for advocacy: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpxHeIqhyPk1bWcPvmkCm7SkH01fJsxBd&emci=41fd2142-4b66-eb11-9889-00155d43c992&emdi=21471a43-5666-eb11-9889-00155d43c992&ceid=5401803>
- Texas Impact Advocacy Days- March 6-9 on Zoom and FREE (learn about issues and get advocacy training) <https://texasimpact.org/event/interfaith-advocacy/?emci=41fd2142-4b66-eb11-9889-00155d43c992&emdi=21471a43-5666-eb11-9889-00155d43c992&ceid=5401803>
- North Texas Food Bank has FREE training on food security issues: <https://ntfbvoice.weebly.com/>
- LeadershipISD is holding a FREE training session on Tuesday, February 16, noon-1:00 on Education Advocacy this Legislative Session. Register here: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/all-in-for-action-education-advocacy-this-legislative-session-tickets-139966081317?keep_tld=1
- There are many special interest groups that probably also have training programs

Where Do We Go from Here?

“It is the task of the church, the people of God, to minister within the structures of society. ... The people of God with kingdom-of-God ideas about power need to work in the political structures of our world, the governments of town and city, state, and nation. ... The people of God with kingdom-of-God ideas about prestige need to work in all the structures of society that serve others. ... Ministry is participating in God’s dream of a good creation, and Jesus is the model.” The Dream of God by Verna Dozier, pp. 108-109.

- Individuals can join a special interest organization or a group addressing broader issues such as:
 - Texas Impact - <https://texasimpact.org/> Texas Impact equips faith leaders and their congregations with information, opportunities, and outreach tools to educate their communities and engage with lawmakers on pressing public policy issues. They provide to members a live presentation on Mondays at noon (with a podcast replay to hear on demand) highlighting what is happening in the legislature each week. They also send out action alerts asking members to contact their representatives about specific bills. Get involved in a Legislative Engagement Group that interests you.
 - Faith in Texas – <https://faithintx.org/> Faith in Texas is a Dallas-based nonpartisan, multi-racial, multi-faith grassroots movement of people united in values working together to achieve economic, racial, and social justice for all. people. Since Faith in Texas is based in Dallas, it might be an organization in which some of us may want to get involved to learn more. They have identified four areas of focus and these two may be of particular interest to the Ascension group:
 - Live Free Texas (mass incarceration and gun violence)
 - Economic Equity (ensure that families in working-class communities are at the tables where economic policy is shaped in their cities, counties, and state)
 - LaRed (immigration reform and assisting immigrant populations)
 - Voter mobilization (holding candidates and representatives accountable to promote justice and freedom)
- A special interest group that may be of general interest is Fair Maps Texas - <https://www.fairmapstexas.org/>. Fair Maps Texas is a nonpartisan reform effort aimed at reforming the redistricting system in Texas. According to the Executive Director of Fair Maps Texas, most of the redistricting is done behind closed doors. The Redistricting Commission does have a few public hearings. If anyone is interested in learning more, you might want to view: https://zoom.us/rec/play/A9024ZazWkBCfYVgbGLmy24vK6Ou33YtnG8Qe-vmbJdLp--tNFgG3bX2kTF9HN1oWrjfZf5FJHyltMcs.TpMQzU6bm-ZsWtMs?continueMode=true&_xzm_rtaid=RNvRDmPpT7Sd9wbOiqI2A.1611871295031.dbab8309095e7edaa2ef88c878b3d5f7&_xzm_rhtaid=573
- Individuals can get to know their representatives and their staffs and treat, email, or call them to advocate on specific issues or bills
- Can we identify one or areas of interest in which we might want to learn more and develop a joint plan to advocate?