

Editorial: Progress, pitfalls in Legislature

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This newspaper has steadily advocated for specific quality-of-life issues on a city-, region- and statewide scale. The current session of the Legislature is an opportunity to make a mark in each area.

With the lawmaking session past the halfway point, it's time for an assessment of how things stand and the work that lies ahead in Austin.

Regional rail

The goal of expanded regional transit, with wider lawmaker support than in the past, has momentum in the Senate with committee passage of Dallas Sen. John Carona's local-option revenue bill. It enjoyed backing from all three North Texans on the panel, including, we're happy to see, Sen. Florence Shapiro of Plano.

Backers stress the obvious: The state provides too little money to solve urban traffic congestion, one reason that Austin, San Antonio and El Paso sought inclusion in the bill. It allows countywide votes on new taxes and fees to build rail; Dallas and other DART cities could pick road and rail projects.

The issue faces rougher sledding in the full Senate and in the House, where the D-FW delegation needs to get behind Keller Rep. Vicki Truitt's companion bill.

Education

Building North Texas' first Tier One research university is critical to a globally competitive economy, and the University of Texas-Dallas, UT-Arlington and the University of North Texas would have the tools under a bill Dallas Rep. Dan Branch passed through his Higher Education Committee.

The concept of rewarding universities for their initiatives has found favor with lawmakers statewide, since it would benefit four other schools. The next step is meshing the House approach with similar bills in the Senate. Ultimately, legislators who care about Texas' future need to fight like Rottweilers to find money for new research funds.

Higher education would also benefit from bills to contain automatic admissions to Texas universities for the top 10 percent of high school grads. A bill by Shapiro has cleared the Senate, and a Branch bill has cleared committee.

Unchecked, the rule would soon eliminate latitude in building well-rounded student bodies at Texas' only current public Tier One schools, UT-Austin and Texas A&M. At

the same time, it's important for lawmakers to elevate other universities to make them as attractive.

A strong public school accountability system keeps students marching toward college or good jobs. For that reason, we're glad Shapiro and Rep. Rob Eissler of The Woodlands are slowing down to answer the head-scratching over their proposals to overhaul Texas' way of measuring schools.

The bills need explicit incentives for schools to get students on a college-bound track. And they must be clear that students should grow considerably in their subjects. Crediting students for minimal growth won't help them.

Bridging Dallas' north-south gap

Several proposals to renew neighborhoods and increase investment south of the Trinity River are advancing. Committees have heard bills to move properties from Dallas' land bank into development, give City Hall more power to control unsafe group homes and finance Dallas' affordable housing program. The bills now need committee votes so they can move to the full House and Senate.

But not all efforts are progressing. For example, no bill has been filed to make it tougher to open bars in southern Dallas, which revolves around the definition of a bar. Rep. Yvonne Davis or another Dallas lawmaker should lead that cause.

Improving air quality

Legislators didn't make serious air improvements in 2007, so progress now is imperative.

We like that Waco Sen. Kip Averitt's proposal to curb greenhouse gas emissions has been heard in committee. His plan, which includes developing energy-efficient technologies, now needs a vote. Similarly, Austin Sen. Kirk Watson's request for Texas' environmental agency to identify cost-effective ways to control emissions deserves a prompt vote.

Abolishing the death penalty

Concern over capital punishment has prompted formation of a special House subcommittee to hear more than three dozen reform bills. It is chaired by Mesquite Rep. Robert Miklos, a former prosecutor who is giving the measures a careful airing.

Even with predominant pro-death-penalty sentiment in the Capitol, we trust lawmakers will find merit in bills forbidding joint trials for capital murder co-defendants and gamesmanship that pits one against the other to secure a death sentence. They should also support a bill allowing a condemned prisoner to witness his last reprieve being decided and one that guards against executing the mentally disabled.

Texas, the nation's leading execution state, also leads the nation in number of DNA exonerations. That ought to chill to the bone, so much so that lawmakers get behind legislation for a hiatus in Huntsville's death chamber until the entire capital punishment system can be dissected.

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