



Capitol Update 3-4-13

Greetings from your Texas Capitol!

We had a wonderful time celebrating Texas Independence Day back in the district, but I'm now back in Austin where things are getting busy. We're only a few days away from the bill-filing deadline, committee hearings are in full swing, and the statehouse is packed full of advocacy groups throughout the week.

I want to take a minute to thank all of my constituents who have taken the time to visit with me, even amidst all the activity. This is an extremely busy time of year for the staff and me, and whether you're here to discuss legislative business or just to say hello, it's great to see friendly faces from the district.

Now on to the Update...

Key Bills for the 83rd Legislative Session

Though I have authored and signed on to several other bills, below are some of the most rigorous issues on which I will be leading the fight this session. Bills I have joint-authored (JA) or co-authored (CA) are denoted accordingly.

- SB 11 (JA) and SB 21 (CA)—These pieces of legislation seek to reform the delivery of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Texas Unemployment benefits, respectively. SB 11 makes multiple changes to the operation of the TANF program, requiring applicants to pass a drug-screening and tightening work-exemptions, both of which reaffirm the intended "temporary" nature of the program. SB 21 also requires that individuals applying for unemployment benefits pass a drug-screening process.
- SB 182—The Campus Personal Protection Act would affirm the individual right to self-preservation by allowing adult students, faculty or staff (21+) with a Concealed Handgun License to carry their firearm on a college campus. Other elements of the bill include an opt-out provision for private universities and create the authority for universities to create dormitory storage policies.
- SB 191—This legislation aims to create a fraud-prevention mechanism for the Lone Star Card, which is the electronic benefits card that recipients use to access various State assistance programs. SB 191 would require the presentation of a photo ID when withdrawing cash with the card, thus ensuring that the only individual receiving benefits is the individual who is eligible to do so.

- SB 436— The CLA bill requires students upon entry and graduation at four-year, public universities to take the Collegiate Learning Assessment. The exam, which has no impact on a student's GPA or ability to graduate, simply measures a student's growth in critical thinking skills, thus providing future-students, parents and taxpayers a measure of the value of their tuition dollar by tracking improvement in a student's skill sets. This would bring a competitive evaluation of our universities by enabling students and parents review average improvements so that they can make an informed, market-based decision on which university provides the greatest value for their tuition dollar.
- SB 437—In 2001, the Texas Legislature voted to give illegal immigrants in-state college tuition rates alongside citizens and legal residents. SB 437 would affirm citizenship by repealing this provision and requiring unlawful residents attending college to pay out-of-state tuition. We must not use taxpayer dollars to benefit the non-citizen over the citizen.
- SB 441—This bill would enable the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, working in conjunction with Texas colleges, to establish “Fast Start” programs for technical and workforce education. This new authority would afford students with prior education to get certified faster, or allow students without prior experience to earn certifications as quickly as they can master the skills. Students would advance as they master the material, rather than on the standard semester-to-semester basis. This is a great way for Texans to qualify for good jobs in the high-demand industries that have boosted the our economy in recent years.
- SB 445—The Students’ Right to Know bill would require all public, four-year universities to provide students with an "Informed Student Document," which would include a broad compilation of academic-performance and student-success data, such as average student loan debt, employment rates upon graduation, costs related to untimely graduation, and average CLA scores (upon passage of SB 436). This bill will give prospective students the ability to make an assessment of the institution to determine if it meets their individual needs, and if it offers the best value for their tuition dollars over a wide spectrum.
- SB 655 — In some cases Texas statutes refer to “public purpose,” or simply “purpose,” when authorizing the use of eminent domain. This bill would create clarity in the law by restoring constitutional language in Texas statute, clearly stating that eminent domain authority can only be exercised for public use—not public purpose.

I've also put together several pieces of locally-focused legislation, such as SB 439, which expands the Weatherford College service district to include Hood County and makes community college resources available to all county residents.

Texas Tribune Hosts "Hot Seat" Forum in Waco

On Friday I had an opportunity to join my colleagues Rep. Doc Anderson (R-Waco) and Rep. Kyle Kacal (R-College Station) at one of the Texas Tribune's "Hot Seat" policy forums. Baylor University President Ken Starr was our gracious host, while Texas Tribune Editor and CEO Evan Smith moderated the discussion. Though we covered a number of important topics—health care, public and higher education, transportation and more—the hour went by quickly! Thanks to those who were able to attend the event; for those who couldn't make it, check out the video [here](#).

Increased Funding Urged for Women's Health

Earlier this week, Senate Health & Human Services Committee Chair Jane Nelson announced support for adding \$100 million to the base budget for women’s health services. This additional funding would go to the

Community Primary Care Services Program, which provides high-quality basic women's health care. Most importantly, this move affirms life by ensuring the funds will not go to abortion providers or their affiliates. I'm proud to stand behind the group's recommendations, which will be formally presented to the Senate Finance Committee in the coming weeks.

Latest News on Judicial Redistricting

The discretionary redistricting of our court system is typically reserved for the session immediately following legislative redistricting, ensuring each court of law is serving Texas citizens proportionally. Just like your Texas senators and representatives, and your U.S. representatives, your judicial representation must be appropriately spread throughout the state in order to accommodate the workload associated with growing and shrinking populations. The legislature has accepted the recommendation of the Texas Supreme Court that our justices and courts are properly allocated, and thus, it will not be necessary to commence judicial redistricting this year.



Sad Losses in Senate District 22

In the past month we have mourned the loss of four good men who called Texas and Senate District 22 home. Jim Gray, who gave the invocation at my 2010 swearing-in, was Associate Pastor of Woodway Baptist Church and served in the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam War; The Honorable M.A. Taylor represented Waco in the Texas House of Representatives from 1985-1993 and later served as Chairman of the McLennan County Republican Party; Midlothian resident and Chief Petty Officer (CPO) Chris Kyle served in the U.S. Navy from 1999-2009 with great distinction as a Navy SEAL. Another Midlothian resident and lifelong Texan, Chad Littlefield, was a close friend of CPO Kyle who often joined him in volunteering with veterans. I ask that you join Mel and I in keeping their respective families in your prayers.

As always, I encourage you to check out live video coverage of the [House](#) and [Senate](#) and to track legislative activity on the [Texas Legislature Online \(TLO\)](#) website.

God Bless,

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads 'Brian Birdwell'.

Brian Birdwell
State Senator, District 22