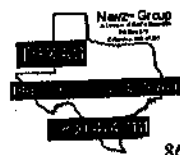


# Conservative coalitions to push state agendas



**COALITION:** Rep. Arlene Wohlgemuth, R-Burleson, speaks recently at the Capitol about a report on state spending released by the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute. To her left is Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, with Rep. Carl Isett, R-Lubbock, at third right

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By STEVE TAYLOR

Valley Morning Star

AUSTIN — If anyone is more excited about the new Republican leadership in Austin than GOP legislators, it's the conservative think tanks, research groups and business associations whose ideas have not had much of a hearing in the past.

The November elections that ushered in the first GOP majority in the Texas House since Reconstruct-

ion strengthened the Republican grip in the Senate and another clean sweep of statewide offices for the party, also gave renewed vigor to groups such as the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute, the Texas Association of Business and the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

"Let the state reporters, pundits, lobbyists and liberal apologists beware. The way government

approaches issues is going to be different," said TPPF spokesman Michael Quinn Sullivan, soon after the November elections.

"The debate has changed: New spending will be scrutinized more, and old spending must be justified. Once-sacred programs now will have to prove their worth to the taxpayer."

Just what the think tanks and

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## AGENDAS / Conservative groups push their agendas

pressure groups want to see in the way of a new approach to government can be gleaned from recently published policy documents by the TCCRI and the TAB.

In addition, the TAB and the TPPF are holding major conventions in Austin this week to unveil their agendas for the 78th Legislature.

The TCCRI released a 137-page report last week detailing 75 recommendations for consolidating and eliminating state agencies, increasing premium sharing and co-payments in programs like Medicaid, and turning some state services over to private enterprise. The group also wants Medicaid families to

report monthly to renew eligibility.

A TCCRI task force that included Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, Rep. Carl Isett, R-Lubbock, and Rep. Arlene Wohlgemuth, R-Burleson, prepared the report.

Shapiro was just named Senate education committee chairwoman by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst. Isett and Wohlgemuth are expected to be handed key jobs when Speaker Tom Craddick announces new House committee assignments next week.

"There is going to be a lot of discussion about this service being cut or that service being cut," Wohlgemuth said. "My number one concern is that my folks back home have just been hit by a homeowners' insur-

ance increase, a significant property tax increase and a car insurance increase. I have to consider that the worst thing for people suffering hard economic times is to give them a tax increase."

The TAB report, titled "Fiscal Responsibility, Meeting the State's Budget Obligations without New Taxes," claims to identify \$15 billion that lawmakers could use to finance the 2004-05 state budget.

"Texans deserve a budget that is written without new taxes," said TAB President Bill Hammond. "Texas has a golden opportunity to rein in spending, to learn to live within its means and to set the stage for a brighter future."

The TAB's annual conference takes place in Austin

Tuesday and Wednesday. Among the speakers scheduled to attend are Gov. Rick Perry, Dewhurst, Craddick and Comptroller Carol Keeton Strayhorn.

The theme of the conference is "not one more dollar" in taxes or regulations, with panel discussions also on medical malpractice and prompt pay, tort reform and health insurance.

According to state statistics, Texas ranked 46th in the percentage of high school students graduating in 2000. The state ranked 50th in the number of children with health insurance; and 44th in the number of poor covered by Medicaid. Texas also ranks near bottom in the percentage of the population that is hungry or malnourished.

The four-day TPDF convention, titled 78th Legislature Policy Orientation, running Jan. 29-Feb. 4, will feature Perry, Dewhurst, Craddick, Attorney General Greg Abbott, Texas Supreme Court Justice Tom Phillips and former U.S. Secretary of Education Bill Bennett.

Issues to be examined at the conference include state taxes and spending, border affairs, water, school finance, K-12 and higher education, insurance, transportation, health care and tort reform.

If groups such as TAB, TPDF and TCCRI are successful in getting their agendas adopted by the new Republican leadership in Austin, the greatest impact could be felt in the Rio Grande Valley and the border region generally.

The Valley, playing catch-up on years of historic under-funding by the state, has benefited in recent years from increased funding for transportation, and public and higher education.

TPDF, like Perry, wants toll roads to feature heavily in the state's highway spending mix.

TCCRI wants to see school finance reform, including elimination of the so-called Robin Hood system that takes money from property-rich school districts and gives to property-poor districts.

Containing some of the poorest communities in the country, the Valley also relies heaviest on state and federal services such as Medicaid and the children's health insurance program, CHIP.

Anne Dunkelberg, an analyst with the Center for Public Policy Priorities, a non-profit group that works on issues affecting low-income Texans, says any reduction in CHIP or Medicaid spending would disproportionately hit the Valley hardest.

"These programs are an important economic player in border counties, even more important than in other parts of the state," Dunkelberg said.

"What that means is that if you have cutbacks, whether they are cutbacks in eligibility, in the services that are paid for, or in the rates that are paid, you are going to have a disproportionately hard impact on the economies of those Valley counties or other border counties."