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# Mr. Estes goes to Austin

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—Lewis Simmons,  
district director

## After two years, senator’s legislative education begins

AUSTIN — In less than four hours, the lieutenant governor will pound his gravel starting another day of the 78th legislative session.

But at 7:25 a.m., everything is still quiet at the Capitol building in Austin.

At state Sen. Craig Estes’ office on the third floor, the door is locked, and none of his staff is in yet. But they are already working on this early morning at an informative breakfast sponsored by various associations lobbying for state funds.

Terry Franks, Estes’ legislative director, is the first to arrive. After opening the office and turning on the lights, Franks makes the first pot of coffee. There will be many more brewed during the day.

“This was the first purchase Craig made,” Franks said, filling a black mug decorated with the state of Texas seal in silver.

The entire office is sprinkled with little pieces of Senate District 30. Grayson County College coasters are piled on the coffee table, while a Graham High School Christmas ornament sits on the bookshelf.

Within 30 minutes the staff of six is at work. The days start early and last long into the night. The telephone never stops ringing. The appointment calendar is packed.

Please see  
**ESTES** on Page 8A

Story by Michelle Kann ☆ Photos by Gary Lawson



Sen. Craig Estes makes a quick phone call from the Senate floor just moments before the start of the session. Although Estes has been serving for two years, this will be his first legislative session in Austin.

# Mr. Estes goes to Austin

## ★★★ Bills authored by the state senator ★★★

■ **Senate Bill 134:** This bill, filed in January, calls for the creation of an additional judicial district in Parker County.

■ **Senate Bill 146:** This bill would amend a loophole relating to registration requirements for certain sex offenders who seek to change their name. Currently, registered sex offenders do not have to alert the authorities if they decide to change their legal name.

This bill was also filed in January.

■ **Senate Bill 484:** This bill, filed on Thursday, is asking for the removal of the competitive bidding requirement in the law governing the Greater Texoma Utility Authority. This act would take effect immediately if it receives a two-thirds vote by all members in both houses. If it doesn't receive enough votes for immediate action, it will go into effect on

Sept. 1.

■ **Senate Concurrent Resolution 1:** Estes filed this resolution on Feb. 6 with the goal of sending a message to the U.S. Congress to restore the federal income tax deductibility of state and local sales tax to states without income tax. This was eliminated in the Tax Reform Act of 1986.

■ **Senate Resolution 148:** This is a tribute at the Senate in memo-

ry of James P. Lyle of Springtown. He will be recognized for his bravery and heroism in averting major disaster when his aircraft went down off the coast of Nantucket Island in 1967.

Source: The Texas Legislature Web site  
www.capitol.state.tx.us/

## ESTES continued from Page 1A

And this is only the beginning of the legislative session.

### The newcomer

Even though Estes won the November election as an incumbent in Wichita Falls, he is considered a freshmen senator in Austin.

Estes first won the seat in 2001 during a special election for the remaining tenure of the late state Sen. Tom Haywood. However, the Texas Senate had already finished for the year.

The senator then ran against Donald Acheson in November 2002 for the post.

Even though he has represented North Texas for almost two years now, he is experiencing his first session.

"It's the most interesting and incredible experience that I have ever had," he said.

On the third floor with a view of downtown Austin, Estes' legislative office is

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Above, Sen. Estes speaks with a visitor in his office. Below, Estes has a private chat with Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin, before the session.

packed with desks, telephones and computers.

"We've got three people crammed in there," Lewis Simmons, district director, said, giving the 30-second tour.

But Estes' aides don't complain about the tight quarters. Most senators and representatives have larger offices in the Capitol extension, a building built mostly underground.

"It's a coup to have a freshmen senator in the actual Capitol on the third floor," Franks said. "Before Estes was in the extension, but he wanted to be moved to the historic part, even if the office is smaller."

The legislative education of Estes started as soon as he was sworn in.

As one of the two freshmen senators, Estes faced a disadvantage in selecting a desk on the Senate floor. Senators choose their desk depending on seniority, so Estes is stuck sitting in the front within feet of Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst.

The superior seats are near the back.

"Then the senators can talk to people without most noticing," Franks said.

## Exhausting days

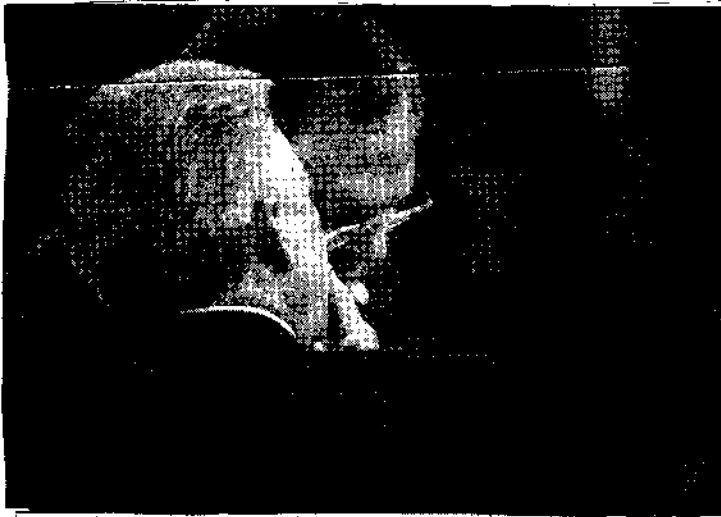
The daily calendar is packed with committee meetings and 15-minute appointments in his office. There are countless requests for discussions with lobbyists, business leaders and Senate District 30 constituents.

Since Estes is vice chairman of both the Senate Veterans Affairs and Military Installations Committee and the Rural Caucus, besides being a member of four committees, finding time for everything is nearly impossible.

Each staff member is assigned to a committee and attends those events when Estes is unable to.

"We are his eyes and ears in those meetings," Simmons said.

At Estes' office, which has an open door policy, the senator attempts to meet as many



people as possible in a day.

"We try to give everyone the same treatment," Simmons said. "He is totally committed to treating everyone the same. The senator finds it most rewarding meeting with the constituents. But sometimes we act like air controllers with symbolic planes circling in the halls."

These back-to-back meetings can wear anyone down, Simmons said.

"One of the stressful parts about being a senator is staying at your peak. He has to stay attentive all day," Simmons said. "Monday through Wednesday is action packed."

Knowing all the issues can be a challenge for any newcomer.

After signing nearly 50 letters, Estes met with Sharon Hull, lobbyist for the Wine Institute, to discuss legislation regarding the direct shipment of wine. With only 15 minutes of Estes' time, Hull rapidly argued her position citing several studies.

She used the acronym NCSL repeatedly.

"Wait a minute. What's the NCSL?" Estes asked, drinking a Diet Coke.

"The National Conference of State Legislatures," Hull, along with Estes' assistant Franks, answered in unison.

"Okay, so I am a part of that," Estes said, joking in this learning instant.

Even Estes admitted the constant meetings until nearly 9 p.m. daily can be

overwhelming.

"We take it one day at a time," he said. "And I want to meet with as many of my constituents as possible. I'm just glad they don't all call on the same day."

Simmons grabbed Estes' navy jacket hanging in the back of his office. He keeps standing as a reminder to the executive director of the Military Facilities Commission that his time is up.

"I'm sorry to cut you off, but he needs to get to session," Simmons said.

Estes reassured his guest that this meeting is not completely over.

"This is just the beginning of the conversation," he said. "We have to take care of the National Guard because they take care of us."

With appointments all day, the question is left hanging in the air: When does the senator eat?

Simmons explained each senator pays \$750 per session to cover the cost of meals in the private senators' lounge. If the session runs into the evening, like it will later this spring, dinner will also be available.

"They can run back there, grab a sandwich every day they are in session," Simmons said.

## His first term

Estes said he isn't feeling the pressure to make a big impact on the 78th legislative session.

"I set a goal for myself to not introduce many bills — just local bills," Estes said. "Probably not more than 24

the entire time. I often ask myself, 'How many new laws do we need?' Part of this job is offensive with passing a law that we need. The other is the defensive and stopping a bill from passing."

The new senator is optimistic about the session but realizes getting the basics down of being a senator will have to come first.

"My goal is to learn the ropes and how things work here," he said. "You really have to know how the process works. I feel great about things. I am just so excited to be here."

Becoming an influential leader in Austin will mean overcoming large challenges along with countless small successes. Two nights earlier at a Texas Public Policy Foundation dinner, Estes took a baby step in his career.

"We are letting the senator speak off the cuff tonight," Trey Blocker, Estes' chief of staff, said.

But his aides weren't worried.

In his opening speech, he described life as a freshmen senator — a daily learning experience for him.

"I have searched my mind for the great things that I have done so far," Estes said. "But on my first day at the session, I wanted to second a motion. But the lieutenant governor wouldn't call on me. Then someone pointed out to me that there is a little button you have to push for Dewhurst to acknowledge you. I can only go up from here."

Surprisingly, Estes writes the majority of his speeches.

"When he is going to speak somewhere, usually Lewis writes an outline and then the senator fills it in with what he wants to say," Blocker said. "It's about 60 percent the senator, 40 percent the staff."

Maybe the largest challenge Estes has faced so far is finding his way through the maze-like capitol building.

After attending the weekly rural caucus meeting in the capitol extension, he walked back to his office.

He climbed one set of stairs and then another. When they reach the third, he turns to Simmons.

"Is there another set of stairs?" Estes said. "I keep getting lost in this place."



As Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst prepares to open the session, Sen. Estes checks his notes while on the Senate floor.

But the day is not over for Estes — it's just beginning. A quick review of his schedule and Estes realizes he has a whole hour until his next appointment. This is enough time to go out for lunch and relax for a while. But as the senator approached his office, a woman is leaving. "Hi, I'm Sen. Craig Estes," he said. "I was just here to see you. Do you have a minute?" she asked. "Sure. Lewis, do we have a minute?" Estes asked Simmons. "Yeah. We have two," Simmons said. "Well, I talk fast," the woman said as they headed into his office. *Regional reporter Michelle Kann can be reached at (940) 763-7530 or by e-mail at kannm@wtr.com.*

### Committees, Affairs etc.

- Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Military Installations Committee
- Vice chairman of the Rural Caucus
- He is also a member of the following committees:
  - Senate Natural Resources Committee
  - Senate Business and Commerce Committee
  - Senate International Relations and Trade Committee
  - Senate Agriculture Subcommittee



Above, Sen. Estes gives a kiss to Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs prior to the start of a rural caucus meeting. At right is Sam Tessen, executive director of the Office of Rural Community Affairs. Below, Estes meets with members of the Military Facilities Commission.

