

New Texas Heroes

By The Honorable Tom Craddick

When the 78th Legislature convened in January, uncertainty was the watchword. This was especially true in the House where we had lost 16 committee chairs from the 77th Legislature; where there was a new speaker and 37 freshmen members; and where Republicans had their first majority in 130 years.

Adding to the drama, the headlines in the morning newspapers on Jan. 14, the day I was elected and lawmakers took their oaths of office, reported that the \$5.1 billion revenue shortfall that we knew about coming in had nearly doubled – to an unprecedented \$9.9 billion.

So, while in some ways it was the best of times for Republicans, it was the worst of times as well. We had a lot of work to do, 140 days to do it and a steep learning curve to overcome.

Along the way, a handful of Democrats, themselves unsure of their roles as the new minority, did what they could to disrupt the legislative process. They dragged out the debate on tort reform with more than 400 amendments. And in May, 51 of them deserted the legislative process altogether, actually leaving the state rather than debate a congressional redistricting bill.

As this is written, amid a mid-July special session, congressional redistricting is the only major goal left unaddressed, and we hope to complete that shortly. That's why I can honestly say that I am elated with what our new House did this year. Here's some of what we accomplished:

We passed comprehensive tort reform aimed at curtailing lawsuit abuses. Obscene awards obtained by a virtual handful of trial lawyers have driven many Texas physicians out of business or out of state by forcing up the cost of medical malpractice insurance. Some counties are without pediatricians and many lack other specialists. Lawsuit abuse also hurts business, limits job growth and drives up the overall cost of goods and services.

In passing the tort bill, we found new heroes among previously underutilized veterans and freshmen. Civil Practices Committee Chairman Joe Nixon, R-Houston, and Vice Chairman (and freshman) Dan Gattis, R-Georgetown, earned their spurs in that contentious debate.

In the only major bill this session that was initiated in the Senate, we passed insurance reforms that should bring down homeowners and auto insurance rates by improving the climate for competition and penalizing the bad actors who have plagued the state in recent years.

Insurance Committee Chairman John Smithee, R-Amarillo, was the only standing committee chair returning from the 77th Legislature, and he was instrumental in working out the details with the Senate in a complicated bill. Other bright lights were freshman Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, and Craig Eiland, D-Galveston.

We transformed a grave, nearly \$10 billion budget deficit into an opportunity to trim the excesses out of state government. And in balancing the state's 2004-2005 budget, as required, we did it without raising taxes – as we promised voters – and without hurting needy Texans.

Contrast that with a dozen or more states, including California, New York and Florida, that are still struggling with budget problems.

Every Texas taxpayer should breathe a sigh of relief for the no-nonsense approach and untold hours of testimony and study Chairman Talmadge Heflin, R-Houston, and his budget-writers put in rebuilding our state budget from the ground up. Count Arlene Wohlgemuth, R-Burleson, Vilma Luna, D-Corpus Christi, Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, and Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie among Talmadge's chief lieutenants.

The House added \$1.2 billion to current spending for public schools and also created two select committees – one to study public education, the other to study higher education. Those key House members will eventually be joined by senators with a goal of creating a funding system for an excellent educational system to serve all Texans equally for the rest of this century.

Rep. Geanie Morrison, R-Victoria, and Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington, are leading the higher ed and public ed select committees, respectively. Their panels will study those systems and recommend how to make them better in a future special session or in the 79th Legislature.

We passed a comprehensive transportation bill that will make it easier to move about in an increasingly crowded state. As a bonus, the transportation package will increase fines for dangerous drivers to help fund the state's hard-pressed trauma centers.

Credit Rep. Mike Krusee, R-Round Rock, and Dianne Delisi, R-Temple, for their leadership on the transportation/trauma plan.

We were able to bring to the floor and pass social legislation Republicans and Democrats had backed for years, but couldn't get out of committee: bills that grant rights to the unborn; that put a 24-hour waiting period on abortion; and that outlaw same-sex marriages.

Reps. Ray Allen (Grand Prairie), Frank Corte (San Antonio) and Warren Chisum (Pampa), respectively, all of Republicans, worked years to make these laws a reality.

Finally, while it might not be high on most Texans' radar, on the last weekend of the session, House members secured language and convinced the Senate to support a strong ethics bill. It will govern members of the Legislature as well as municipal office-holders in cities with populations of more than 100,000 and school districts with enrollments exceeding 5,000.

This was a total House team effort, but the last-minute champions were Republicans Terry Keel of Austin, Jerry Madden of Richardson and Mary Denny of Aubrey and Democrats Ron Wilson of Houston and Steve Wolens of Dallas.

The ethics bill apparently is so good that it even got rave reviews from some of our harshest critics: the state newspapers' editorial boards.

Generally, though, that support was atypical. The editorial boards have generally been unfriendly. They demanded we increase taxes, charging early on that we couldn't balance the budget without hurting the poor. They warned we shouldn't take up redistricting. They said tort reform was a sellout to business. They said some of the social legislation we passed was insulting to women. They said we were giving away too much power to the governor.

However, as a wag journalist himself once noted, editorial writers are like people who enter a battlefield after the fighting ends -- and shoot the wounded! In short, the state's editorial writers are largely liberals who see themselves as white knights, but who don't understand how real people think.

One last criticism of our critics. Editorial writers never gave us credit for appointing record numbers of Hispanics, African-Americans and women and Democrats to key leadership posts, but they were quick to jump us "for killing the bipartisan spirit of the Texas House" when the Democrats skipped town for Ardmore.

I'd just like to conclude this point by saying that bipartisanship goes both ways and if its spirit suffered in the 78th Legislature, the fault wasn't that of Republicans alone.

Most Texans want lower taxes and a business climate that creates jobs and revenue that builds schools and roads. Most Texans are independent thinkers. They don't want a hand out, but they do want opportunities to own homes, buy cars or trucks, maybe take a trip or two a year and send their kids to college.

That's one reason another initiative we supported -- the Governor's Enterprise Fund -- is so important. Democrats opposed it; editorial writers opposed it. But its creation already has paid off: \$50 million from that new fund will help make possible a \$1 billion Texas Instruments computer chip plant in the Dallas area. A pretty good return on investment, I'd say.

This is not to say that we should ignore the poor and needy. We're not doing that, but it's true: A rising tide lifts all boats. We think the tide is coming in here in the Lone Star State and we're elated to be a big part of it.

Tom Craddick, R-Midland, is Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives.