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COLUMNS

Perry facing flak over taxes

Gov. Rick Perry is finding that gubernatorial power is much easier to exercise negatively than positively.

His threat to veto any new taxes last year kept legislators from even considering new taxes them, not wanting a pro-tax vote on their record if the measure was doomed.

But now, even business leaders are begging, "tax us. Spending on public education deprives us of the quality work force that will cause businesses to expand," David Laney of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce told a special legislative committee on school finance.

Something positive, such as raising teacher pay significantly, takes leadership — as former Democratic Gov. Mark White discovered. In 1983, he took office in 1983, he pledged to raise teachers' pay without raising taxes. Legislative leaders finally made him choose which promise to break.

Goaded by billionaire Ross Perot, a school reform special session in 1984 brought a tax increase and higher teacher pay — but also competency testing. Texas moved up in state teacher pay charts for a change, but teachers hated the test.

Teachers, and legislators, had come to distrust White, and it spread to voters. In 1986, they were even willing to take back Republican Bill Clements, whom they'd ousted in 1982.

Perry could face similar dangers, for slightly different reasons. He has jawboned about his commitment to quality education, and the need for a special legislative session to revamp school finance, which he may announce today in a speech in San Antonio.

But teachers, who think his veto threat helped pushed legislators to cut the

state's contribution to their health insurance in half last year, are saying "show us the money."

After Perry went off to the Bahamas to bone up on education with school voucher sugar daddy James Leininger and anti-taxer Grover Norquist, one teacher group, the Association of Texas Professional Educators, withdrew its support for a special legislative session.

"It appears that a special session will be more about politics and 'education reform' and less about ensuring academic success of our students," said ATPE association spokesman Mike Crouch said.

Perry also angered local officials by calling for a 3 percent annual cap on increases in property appraisal rates without a vote. Combined with a proposed limit on local revenue increases without a vote, they think Perry's plan amounts to avoiding the state's funding responsibilities, but putting a lid on locals' ability to make up the gap.

Even the Collin County commissioners, in a strongly Republican area, unanimously blasted Perry's idea.

The governor and key legislators are looking to up "sin" taxes — on tobacco, alcohol, and licensing video lottery terminals. But, even if they put the state further into the gambling business, gambling only goes so far.

The only sure things, it's said, are death and taxes. Perry's dilemma is if he raises taxes to help schools, he may be politically dead. But if he doesn't, he may also.

Two Republican women — U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, quietly, and Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn, loudly with almost-daily blasts at Perry — are waiting to see if Perry can figure it out.

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