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180 Texas GOP readies push on social agenda

List of initiatives lined up for Jan. 11 session

By **CHRISTY HOPPE**
The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN — The first bill assigned a priority number in the House isn't about public education or child abuse protection. It's a constitutional ban on gay marriage.

Social conservatives have a firm grip on the levers of Texas government and are determined to steer the legislative session that begins Jan. 11.

Conservatives in and out of the Legislature say the time has come for

school vouchers and has passed for quickie divorces. They will fight the legalization of slot machines and champion a ban on human cloning, including embryonic stem-cell research.

And they will join ranks with some pharmacists and church-affiliated hospitals so they will not have to dispense the "morning-after pill" or other prescriptions that they morally oppose. For some hospitals, that includes not having to provide such

THE AGENDA

Social conservatives have been the backbone of the Texas Republican Party in its rise to statewide dominance. Here's what they'll be pushing in the Legislature next month:

Marriage

A constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage and requirements that couples receive premarital counseling.

Science and medicine

A ban on human cloning and embryonic stem-cell research, and protections for pharmacists who don't want to dispense medicines such as birth control and "morning after" pills.

Education

Private-school vouchers, expansion of charter schools and cost-saving measures implemented before public school funding is increased.

Health insurance

Creation of savings accounts to fund health costs in place of federally funded programs, such as those for low-income children.

Source: Dallas Morning News research

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pills for rape victims brought to their emergency rooms.

Bolstered by Republican dominance of the state and a nationwide electoral sweep, Texas conservative activists now want to parlay their fervent backing of the GOP into social policies they've long craved.

"There's no doubt that conservatives are in a good position," said Kelly Shackelford, president of the Free Market Foundation.

Ending 'blockade'

"Last session was kind of opening the gate that had been blockaded for so long," said Shackelford, referring to 2003 successes such as state laws prohibiting gay marriage, requiring waiting periods for abortions and allowing a moment of silence in public schools.

"Now we're getting back to the kind of positive things that we can get done to help preserve life, to protect families or marriages. Those kinds of basic issues," he said.

The outnumbered Democrats who oppose much of the social conservatives' wish list know they need help from moderate Republicans to slow the train.

"You'll find that even within their party, there is a distaste for some of these things," said Mike Lavigne, executive director of the state Democratic Party.

It's a small but powerful group of conservatives that he said is detouring the entire Republican Party down an extremist road.

"It's always interesting that

the people who champion less government are the ones who want these things that get right into your life," Lavigne said.

State GOP spokeswoman Sherry Sylvester said it is the Democrats who are out of the mainstream.

"We have a supermajority here," she said, citing Republican control of the House, Senate and every statewide office.

Voice of the voters

"The people of Texas elected these Republicans because they wanted this agenda. I think it's a boost for the party that they're in there acting on what people are excited about," Sylvester said.

Few doubt that a constitutional amendment defining marriage as solely between a man and a woman will breeze through the session and go before the voters.

An alternative proposal backed by Shackelford and others would define marriage and also prohibit civil unions or any other legal recognition of same-sex couples.

"To me, anyone who stands in front of that is committing political suicide," he said.

Conservatives also want the state to require prenuptial counseling and waiting periods for divorce.

The aim is to make marriage "more protected and more special," Shackelford said.

The number one challenge on the agenda will be a bill that prohibits human cloning, a measure that's aimed at preserving the sanctity of life, according to several groups.

Expecting a challenge

Cathie Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum, said





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she is optimistic but also expects resistance.

In past sessions, the human cloning ban has failed to advance.

"I've always seen the homosexual lobby and abortion lobby working together. That has always been our greatest opposition," she said.

On economic, education and social-service issues, groups such as the Eagle Forum, the Free Market Foundation and the Texas Public Policy Foundation said they favor fiscally sound policies that address problems instead of throwing more money at them.

Their agenda, which already has legislative sponsors, includes giving vouchers to children in low-performing public schools that they can use for private tuition.

It also includes creating health-care savings accounts for low-income Texans that would replace federally funded insurance premiums, such as those used in the Children's Health Insurance Program.

The groups also oppose additional spending on schools until more is done to trim administrative expenses — even as a court has ruled that state spending on education is unconstitutionally low.

Michael Quinn Sullivan of the Texas Public Policy Foundation said the issues are about the best use of taxpayers' money and building accountability into the system.

In medical care, savings accounts — a set amount of money provided for all but catastrophic expenses — would encourage people to maintain their health, while vouchers create competition in educa-

tion and give parents academic choices, he said.

Dan Quinn, spokesman for the progressive Texas Freedom Network, called these radical ideas.

"The last thing we need to be doing is draining money from public schools to fund tuition at private religious schools," he said.

Most of the conservative agenda, he said, is "anti-public school, anti-health insurance for poor children, anti-gay and lesbian families," Quinn said. "It seems they are more against things than for constructive solutions for the real problems that we face in Texas."

Cal Jillson, a political science professor at Southern Methodist University, said he believes that conservatives will win and score political points on the anti-gay marriage proposal. And they might get a pilot program for vouchers in exchange for placing more money in public schools, he said.

School funding a must

But as the party in charge, Jillson said, Republicans need to tackle the public school finance system — or risk the wrath of voters who continually cite education as their top concern.

"You've got to get education done, then you can have some fun," he said.

"It's possible for the social conservatives to overplay their hands," he said.

"A lot of that baseline conservative work has already been done. A lot of it is already on the books in Texas.

"The question," Jillson said, "is whether you want to push the envelope."