



Senate approves \$139.4 billion budget

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The Senate on Saturday night approved a two-year, \$139.4 billion state budget plan that fiscal conservatives call undisciplined, liberals insist is too frugal and budget writers say is just right.

The vote was 30-1. Casting the lone dissenting vote was Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, who said the proposal did not adequately address the needs of poor and middle-income Texans.

"We owe the people of Texas and especially the children, better," he said.

The proposal now goes to the House, and if approved there, to Gov. Rick Perry.

The proposal calls for a 10 percent increase in state spending for 2006-2007 that would reverse many, but not all of the cuts to social service programs enacted last session when lawmakers faced a \$10 billion budget shortfall.

It would provide across-the-board pay raises to state employees — 4 percent the first year, 3 percent the second — expand mental health funding and fund emergency reforms to child and adult protection services.

Funding for higher education would jump by \$1.1 billion in state and federal money to \$5.4 billion for four-year state colleges and universities; public education would see an additional influx of \$2.8 billion, bringing the total public education budget to \$33.9 billion over two years, the largest single category in the proposal.

Sen. Steve Odgen, the Republican from Bryan who chairs the finance conference committee, called the proposal a "good, conservative budget."

During Saturday's 70-minute floor debate, Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin, lamented that more had not been proposed.

"I don't like this budget. It makes me anxious and nervous. It is not enough for our Texas needs," he said.

Barrientos said he was forced to vote for it simply because there was not another budget proposal on the table.

House and Senate committee members reached agreement on the proposal just three hours before Friday's midnight deadline to have it signed and printed.

Fiscal conservatives have attacked the proposal as too bloated.

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"Two years ago these lawmakers closed a \$10 billion shortfall through sound fiscal management, but by all accounts that same discipline does not seem to be in place today," said Michael Quinn Sullivan, of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank in Austin, in a written statement.

Rep. Jim Pitts, a Republican from Waxahachie who chairs the House Appropriations Committee, said that late Wednesday, Senate members sent over a supplemental spending bill that included millions in new money for the Irma Rangel School of Pharmacy in Kingsville and a medical school in El Paso.

House members, he said, were adamant that the projects would be too costly. They demanded those items be removed.

In the final supplemental bill, they were.

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