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2007 legislative session could be filled with fireworks

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AUSTIN — Immigration, school vouchers and harsher punishments for sex offenders are among a buffet of hot-button issues awaiting Texas lawmakers when a new legislative session starts Tuesday.

Then there are the complex tasks of balancing the budget, dealing with rising property appraisals and possibly revising the business tax enacted during a special legislative session last year to help fund schools.

Add in some rough and tumble political gamesmanship like that playing out in the race for speaker of the Texas House of Representatives and it could make for a long and unpredictable five months in Austin.

The results of the speaker's race and the attitude of lawmakers after it's over could determine the session's success. Much will depend on whether Democrats and Republicans — not to mention moderates and hard-liners within each party — can get along.

"It's going to take legislators willing to put partisanship and divisiveness aside to work for the greater good of this state," said Robert Black, spokesman for Republican Gov. Rick Perry.

The fireworks could begin when the biennial session starts on Tuesday. That's when House members will choose a speaker, who can control the destiny of most House proposals.

Republican Tom Craddick of Midland has held the job since 2003 and has been criticized as being dictatorial and heavy-handed. Two fellow Republicans — Rep. Brian McCall of Plano and Rep. Jim Pitts of Waxahachie — announced plans in late December to challenge him. McCall on Thursday threw his support behind Pitts, a former Craddick ally.

Craddick's supporters say his strong leadership has enabled the Legislature to solve many thorny issues, such as school finance reform. And his spokeswoman, Alexis DeLee, said he has more than enough support to win another term.

"We're still confident in our numbers," DeLee said.

This year it will take at least 75 votes in the 149-member chamber to elect a new speaker. One Houston-area seat is vacant because of a death but will be filled within the next month.

Once the speaker's race is settled, the only thing lawmakers are legally required to do is adopt a multibillion-dollar state budget. But even that won't be easy thanks to last year's massive property tax overhaul.

To meet a court order, the Legislature met in special session last spring and implemented \$13.5 billion in tax cuts for 2006-07, to be made up with new state revenue. That will cause total state spending to surge, likely surpassing the spending limit lawmakers are constitutionally required to set at the start of the session.

Even with an expected surplus of about \$15 billion, that puts fiscally conservative Republicans in a rough spot: deciding whether to abide by the spending constraints or vote to bust the cap.

Their decision will dictate how much money they have to spend on other programs, like health care, schools and prisons. Most economists predict that the next budget cycle won't be so flush, so they'll need to stash money away to maintain the property tax cuts in future years.

Still, visions of attack ads calling them big spenders might give some lawmakers indigestion before the vote, said Dick Lavine, senior fiscal analyst for the Center for Public Policy Priorities.

"It should be easy for a legislator to explain to his constituents why he or she had to make this vote, but voters have to understand what the choices are," said Lavine, whose group advocates for low-income families.

When they're not poring over the budget, lawmakers likely will be fighting over a crackdown on illegal immigration. A variety of bills already have been filed, including one designed to challenge the automatic citizenship of babies born in the United States to illegal immigrants.

The bill by state Rep. Leo Berman would deny state benefits to the children of illegal immigrants. It would only apply to children born after the bill took effect.

Sex offenders also face harsher punishments under legislation backed by Republican Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who presides over the Senate. Repeat child sex offenders could face the death penalty and anyone convicted of a sex crime against a victim under the age of 14 may face lifetime monitoring.

Other proposals call for increasing in the statute of limitations for sexual abuse cases and requiring sex offenders from other states who move to Texas to register with Texas authorities.

The perennial school voucher debate also could flare up again, with proponents pushing for programs to let students in low-performing public schools use tax money to attend a private school. One proposal would let the parents of children with autism choose the public or private school that would best serve their child.

But following election defeats of a few high-profile voucher supporters, the issue may not go far this session.

"We don't deny it's going to be difficult," said David Guenthner, of the pro-voucher Texas Public Policy Foundation. "We'll continue to educate members and look at various ways to inject some form of compromise."

Associated Press writer April Castro contributed to this report.



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