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Capitol Roundup

School bus cleanup to aid children's lungs; Former Bush chief: Get better, Texas. next best goes here

Friday, February 09, 2007

PUBLIC SAFETY

Agency says REAL ID cost is \$268 million

Department of Public Safety officials now estimate the cost of implementing the federal REAL ID Act will be a \$268 million.

DPS Director Tommy Davis delivered the news Wednesday to a House Appropriations Subcommittee on Criminal Justice.

Details: More than 700 new full-time employees over five years.

The new tally is much higher than the earlier \$13 million estimate to implement the changes mandated by Congress in how states issue the driver's licenses. The feds are not giving states any money to make the necessary changes, and several states have balked at the cost.

The Legislative Budget Board earlier estimated the cost to all states at \$11 billion.

If states don't comply, the feds have promised to stop honoring their driver's licenses as ID.

ENVIRONMENT

School bus cleanup to aid children's lungs

Riding on Texas' 35,000 school buses is the dirtiest part of many children's day, and Sen. Kirk Watson wants to change that.

The Austin Democrat announced Thursday that he has filed a bill to retrofit school buses with exhaust-scrubbing filters and mechanical modifications to reduce the pollution they generate.

Cost: \$100 million over several years, using a share of the fees paid by drivers for vehicle inspections.

"Children are the most vulnerable because their lungs are developing, and this is perhaps the most damaging time for them to be exposed to 40 different toxins that are in school bus exhaust," said Watson, former chairman of the Texas Air Control Board, forerunner of the state's environmental agency.

Lined up in support: the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Texas Parent Teachers Association, the Greater Houston Partnership and the Texas Clear Air Working Group.

Lawmakers approved similar legislation two years ago, but it was not funded, Watson said. This measure is Senate Bill 529.

HEALTH

Former Bush chief: Get better, Texas

Tommy Thompson, who served as President Bush's health and human services chief from 2001 to 2005, encouraged Texas leaders to pursue innovative ways to reduce health care costs.

At the Texas Public Policy Foundation's policy orientation Thursday for the Legislature, Thompson said Texas should attack the most expensive health care cost, chronic illnesses, by seeking permission from U.S. officials to start programs through Medicaid, the federal-state health insurance program for low-income people.

"Think bold, visionary and ask for the moon," said Thompson, urging lawmakers to attack the most prevalent and expensive long-term illnesses in Texas — those related to tobacco, diabetes and obesity — by offering incentives for Medicaid recipients to improve their health.

For example, he said, Texas could pursue a federal waiver to encourage smokers on Medicaid to quit by providing tools such as nicotine patches.

"Seventy percent of smokers want to quit," he said. "So why don't we try and help them?"

To combat diabetes, the state could try a disease management program for Medicaid recipients. It would change the direction of Medicaid in Texas overnight and improve the quality of health, he said.

As for obesity, he said, "ladies and gentlemen, we're just too darn fat in America." He suggested a nutrition program for Medicaid recipients.

VETOES

Legislative override of governor proposed

Houston Rep. Gary Elkins filed a proposal Thursday that, with voter approval, could result in three-day periods after legislative sessions for lawmakers to gather and attempt to override gubernatorial vetoes.

Elkins, a Republican, said he did not draft House Joint Resolution 59 to gig Perry.

"This is not about the governor," he said. "This is about the power of the people, restoring the power to the Legislature, where it belongs."

Proposed constitutional amendments require the approval of two thirds of the House and Senate and voter adoption at the polls. The last legislative override? It happened in 1979. Members took umbrage, evidently, at Gov. Bill Clements' veto of a measure affecting Comal County.

Quote of the day

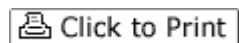
"They would be Texas quality, and they'd roughly cost about half."

Sen. Craig Estes, R-Wichita Falls, on his proposal to build a state prison in Mexico to house the more than 8,000 Texas inmates who are Mexican citizens.

Compiled from staff and wire reports

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