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Group says property appraisal reform threatened by lawmakers.

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**By David Doerr**

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With all the hubbub in Austin over HPV vaccines, the proposed TXU buyout and toll road concerns, appraisal reform — one of Gov. Rick Perry's most prized priorities — has received little attention in the Legislature and could be dead in the water.

But Tom Pauken, appointed by Perry last year to head an appraisal reform task force, hopes to resuscitate the initiative aimed at reining in government spending and rising tax bills. On Wednesday, Pauken, accompanied by a cadre of appraisal reform advocates, stopped in Waco as part of an eight-city tour aimed at gaining the attention of lawmakers by drumming up local support.

"There is a lot of clutter out there," he said. "My point has been that this is the time to make appraisal reform the No. 1 priority this legislative session and get some of these provisions on the floor of the House or the Senate."

If the legislation is not passed this year, the savings that taxpayers should be receiving from the recent one-third cut to school property tax rates will be eaten up through increased appraisals within the next three to six years, said Pauken, former chairman of the Republican Party of Texas.

Pauken was accompanied by Tina Benkiser, chairwoman of the Republican Party of Texas; Talmadge Heflin, former chairman of the House Appropriations Committee; and Paul Bettencourt, Harris County tax assessor, during a press conference at the McLennan County Republican Party headquarters.

To illustrate the issue, Bettencourt presented statistics showing that Waco had the highest percentage increase in taxes of 13 of the state's largest cities.

The average Waco tax bill has risen \$624, a 62.5 percent increase, between 2000 and 2005, according to Bettencourt's analysis based on state comptroller data.

Critics of the current appraisal system say it amounts to a "stealth tax" because it allows cities and counties to bring in more revenue even if tax rates are kept steady.

Pauken's task force, which held public hearings across the state last year to gather input, unveiled a package of recommendations to reform the system shortly before the opening of the legislative session in January.

The task force in particular recommends requiring a 5 percent cap on annual revenue increases for cities and counties that could be exceeded only with voter approval.

It also promotes changing the makeup of appraisal district boards to include two public representatives and giving voters the option of enacting a local half-cent sales tax dedicated to property tax relief.

### **Hostile territory**

But cities and counties have objected to the changes, fearing it would leave them paralyzed when raising money to pay for essential services.

The Texas Municipal League and the Texas Association of Counties have lobbied vigorously against the proposals and have so far been successful in keeping them bottled up in legislative committees.

Heflin, now an analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, described Fred Hill, R-Richardson, chairman of the House Local Government Ways and Means Committee, as "hostile" toward the changes.

Hill's committee could keep many of the bills from reaching the House floor for an up-or-down vote, he said.

Besides the trouble the proposals face in committee, they could also fall victim to the tension that has grown between Perry and the Legislature.

Much of the current session has been dominated by efforts by lawmakers to put a check on Perry's attempt to increase his power through issuing executive orders.

Despite facing the challenges of a distracted Legislature and an uncooperative committee chairman, Pauken and the others say they hope they can spur taxpayers to urge lawmakers to push for the proposed changes this session.


“We are trying to bring it back and off the back burner,” he said.

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