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House votes to put teacher pay before tax cut

By KELLEY SHANNON Associated Press Writer
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AUSTIN — The Texas House, faced with a decision on further reducing school property tax rates, gave tentative approval Thursday to a measure that would give teachers a \$6,000 pay raise before the reduction could kick in.

There's no money in the bill for the teacher pay raise, which also would apply to full-time librarians, counselors and school nurses. The leader of the Senate declared the raise proposal dead.

Democratic Rep. Jim Dunnam of Waco added the teacher pay provision, with the overwhelming approval of the House. It essentially thwarts the proposed tax reduction, which would have taken property tax rates from \$1 per \$100 valuation down to 91 cents.

"It does get in the way of the tax cut. That's exactly what it's designed to do," said Rep. Ken Paxton, the McKinney Republican who pushed the tax reduction proposal. He said he hopes the legislation can be restored to its original intent when it reaches the Senate.

Republican Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the leader of the Senate, said he doesn't see any chance of the bill passing with the teacher pay proposal in it. He said a \$6,000 raise per year would mean \$5 billion more for the two-year budget cycle.

"And while I want to raise teachers' salaries, as we did in the special session this past May, I think it's going to be hard for us to come up with that kind of money," Dewhurst said.

Texas legislators reduced school property taxes last year from a maximum \$1.50 down to \$1 as part of a school finance package.

The new proposal by Paxton and several other influential Republicans would have given the additional tax cut beginning in September. It would have cost the state an estimated \$2.5 billion over the two-year budget cycle.

Dunnam and other Democrats argued there were more pressing needs for the money.

"This is where you put your money where your mouth is," Dunnam said, urging fellow House members to side with him on the teacher raise amendment. "My fourth-grader understands it — she understands her teacher ought to get paid."

House members voted 113-25 in favor of the amendment, with some of those who spoke against it even voting for the politically popular proposal. Then the House voted 131-5 for preliminary approval of the overall Paxton bill.

Republican House Speaker Tom Craddick noted afterward that the Legislature last year in a special session approved a \$2,000 pay raise for teachers, counselors, librarians and school nurses.

"I think that the members of the House are very supportive of a teacher pay raise, and I think they're very supportive of a property tax cut," Craddick said.

The 57,000-member Texas Federation of Teachers praised the House action.

"A solid majority of the Texas House today sent a clear message to legislative leaders that improving teacher pay is an urgent priority — one that must not be neglected at a time when the state has billions of dollars of available revenue," said federation president Linda Bridges.

An American Federation of Teachers salary survey showed that the average Texas teacher salary in

2005, the latest year available, was \$41,009, compared with the national average of \$47,602. Since then Texas teachers were given the \$2,000 across-the-board raise last year.

The conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation criticized the decision in a statement, saying it holds tax relief hostage to massive spending and predicting that taxpayers will be outraged.

"With a \$14.2 billion surplus, there has never been a better time to return at least some of that money to the people who paid it. The Dunnam amendment now makes that impossible," former legislator Talmadge Heflin said on behalf of the group.

The tax cut bill is HB 2785.

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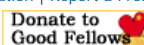
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