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## A legislative session look

BY F.A. KRIFT  
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MIDLAND So who's watching the state legislature online when you're watching Oprah?

The Texas Public Policy Foundation's staffers for one, and they're doing research that informs policymakers as well.

While you're reading Oprah's Book Club selection "Middlesex," they're reading Senate Bill 103 — every single word, likely with a yellow highlighter in hand.

No wonder a predominantly older crowd gathered at the Midland Petroleum Club and listened to their lunchtime review of the 80th legislative session.

Two weeks after the session ended, the non-partisan, free-market promoting, Austin-based research think tank's leaders outlined and opined Monday on the ups and downs of Austin leaders' finest and not-so-finest decisions.

Former Midland mayor and foundation board member Ernest Angelo lauded the group for its investigations and research that lead to smaller, more efficient government.

"They've had a real impact," Angelo said.

But that doesn't mean, the foundation's concerns were fully addressed this session, its leaders said.

The way the state budget is confusingly worded and tediously presented is an issue of its own, research fellow and former state representative Talmadge Heflin said.

"We believe, yes, even legislators should be able to understand it," he joked.

Heflin lauded the state for implementing online access to its spending but said lawmakers should have returned part of the \$7 billion rainy day fund set aside to taxpayers.

In criminal justice, the foundation's Center for Effective Justice director, Marc Levin, celebrated legislators' reform of the Texas Youth Commission after a statewide scandal erupted from sexual abuse allegations at the West Texas State School in Pyote.

Even while legislation passed to improve TYC employee training and staff-to-inmate ratios, the state agency's budget dropped based on expectations of a smaller inmate population.

Levin mentioned the possible closure or transformation of TYC facilities, which could include the West Texas State School, but he doesn't believe it is at the top of legislators' list.

"The decision should be based on facts and evidence and not on a specific incident," Levin said.

Levin promoted the use of punishment alternatives to costly prison sentences for misdemeanor criminals, especially on the juvenile level.

For education, education policy analyst Brooke Dollens Terry applauded end-of-course exams replacing Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills testing for high schoolers.

"It seems to be a much more fair way to test students," Terry said.

In health care reform, the foundation opposed efforts to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program, policy vice president Mary Katherine Stout said, but House Bill 109 passed opening up 100,000 more people eligible to the program.

The Texas Public Policy foundation called it a "safety net program."

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