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Taxpayer Foundation Takes Critical Look At Legislature

The taxpayer-friendly Texas Public Policy Foundation has reviewed the recent legislative session, and evaluated the changes lawmakers made—and failed to make.

"The 80th Legislature did show greater restraint on spending than past legislatures, notably while experiencing an unprecedented budget surplus, with growth in budgeted ongoing expenditures at just over the Foundation's estimate of population growth and inflation over the next two years," the TPPF says.

Still, "the state's budget is a confusing document that often yields little information and often combines several programs in one line item or spreads spending on programs throughout the budget," it says. "As a result, it is difficult to get an accurate picture on state spending and the use of taxpayer dollars."

The Legislature did pass one bill to help make the budget more transparent—H.B. 3430 will require that all state expenditures be posted on the Internet, with a searchable database of spending and contracts.

Lawmakers missed an opportunity to further reduce school property taxes.

"While the property tax cut measure found a good deal of support in the House... it was weakened by an amendment that would have tax relief hostage unless new and higher spending was approved for teacher pay raises," the TPPF notes.

"The additional property tax relief did not get a hearing in the Senate."

There was a partial victory for taxpayers on the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund tax. Though the outdated phone tax was not immediately repealed, it will only last for one more year and expire three years before its scheduled sunset of 2011. That will save taxpayers more than \$600 million.

The TPPF says it's disappointed in the Legislature on several education issues. School choice efforts were blocked.

"Currently, the only forms of school choice in Texas are charter schools and public school transfers," the TPPF says. "Aside from these options, the only parents who have 'choice' are those who can afford to move to a better neighborhood or send their children to private schools."

Six bills were filed that would have advanced school choice.

"Of these, only the autism voucher bill made it out of the Senate Education Committee, but the Senate did not have the votes necessary to bring it to the Senate floor for debate," the TPPF reports.

It also says efforts to increase accountability failed.

"S.B. 1643 by Sen. Florence Shapiro which would have given school principals the ability to get rid of ineffective teachers (after three years of bad evaluations) did

not make it to the Senate floor for debate," the TPPF says.

But lawmakers took a strong stand against the U.S. Supreme Court's *Kelo* decision and abuses of eminent domain with H.B. 2006—although word came late Friday that Gov. Rick Perry had vetoed the bill.

More successfully, lawmakers fought off attempts to re-regulate the electricity market.

"The lack of new regulations will give the electric market—which was only fully deregulated as of Jan. 1—time to demonstrate the benefits of deregulation," the TPPF says. "If Texas can make it without a special session, the move to re-regulate may fade away, and Texas will continue to be the best example of the success of deregulation in the country and even the world."

The TPPF supported the successful Medicaid reform legislation, authored by Sens. Jane Nelson and Bob Deuell, and urges the state to continue to press the federal government for more flexibility.

Watchdog groups such as the Texas Public Policy Foundation help to monitor and evaluate the staggering number of bills that are filed, and the few that become law. Siding with the taxpayer, the TPPF is doing a great service to the state.