



Politics

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CAMPAIGN 2007

Cancer funds may hinge on voter turnout

Higher numbers give proposition a better chance; critics question \$3 billion proposal

By POLLY ROSS HUGHES
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AUSTIN — If most predictions pan out, voters will head to the polls Nov. 6 and agree for Texas to go \$3 billion in debt to fight cancer.

After all, as bipartisan backers and celebrity supporters of Proposition 15 note, everyone knows someone who has battled cancer or lost a life to the state's No. 2 killer.

Yet low voter numbers, not uncommon for elections on constitutional amendments, could turn those predictions on their head, said one political strategist.

And while critics agree that funding cancer research is popular and even noble, they caution that it's unwise for government to invest borrowed money in ventures with no guaranteed results.

Proposition 15 would authorize the state to issue up to \$300 million a year in bonds for a decade. The newly established Cancer Prevention and Research Institute would award grants to researchers seeking causes and cures for all types of cancer.

Proponents say the initiative could help fill a void left by cuts in federal funding and transform Texas into a world leader in cancer research by doubling state-based funding.

The proposition also boasts backers in high places: Republican Gov. Rick Perry, seven-time world cycling champion and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong, and University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center President Dr. John Mendelsohn, to name a few.

No organized opposition has emerged to Proposition 15, but detractors say going into debt is an irresponsible way to fund a goal that might prove elusive. Backers counter that the state would share in proceeds from any major patents that could result, and such income would help pay back the bonds.

"The opposition is really voter apathy," said political strategist Bryan Epstein, a consultant for Texans to Cure Cancer, the leading political action committee pushing passage of the measure.

"Proposition 15 safely passes if the turnout is over 1 million," Epstein said last week. "It becomes more challenging if the turnout is less than a million."

High-profile bond initiatives in Houston aimed at public schools, the port authority and criminal justice could attract more voters to the polls, he said, but elections for constitutional amendments often draw lackluster statewide turnouts.

Drawing experts, jobs

A number of well-established organizations supporting the cancer initiative — the Lance Armstrong Foundation, Susan G. Komen for the Cure and the American Cancer Society, Texas — plan to focus on grass-roots, get-out-the-vote efforts with a well-honed message.

The Texas Department of State Health Services estimates 95,000 Texans will be diagnosed with cancer this year and 37,000 will die from the disease.

As federal funding for cancer research declines, Texas could become a world leader in cancer research, drawing top scientific talent, creating high-paying jobs that help the economy and cutting state spending on cancer by finding more effective prevention and treatment.

Lawmakers could choose to fund the research solely through bonds, but they also retain the option of tapping general revenues. In companion legislation, which becomes effective if Proposition 15 passes, lawmakers created the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute, which would award grants to public or private institutions, state universities and medical schools.

Ten percent a year, by law, would be funneled to cancer prevention. Shared proceeds from patents could help pay back the bonds.

"I can't imagine anything more important, other than education, for Texas than finding a way to diminish this disease. We are going to have some of the most important researchers not only in the country but in the world. I think we are going to become the No. 1 cancer researcher on the planet," said former Democratic Comptroller John Sharp, treasurer for Texans to Cure Cancer.

It's important to draw the best scientists to Texas by assuring them research dollars will continue as a sustained commitment, said Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Lewisville, the measure's Senate sponsor.

Is goal unrealistic?

Yet, despite Texas-style rhetorical flourishes, such as comparing sending a man to the moon to finding a cure for cancer, fiscal conservatives urge caution.

"When you consider the billions and billions spent annually (on cancer research), saying \$300 million is going to be the pathway to the cure can't be considered realistic," said Michael Quinn Sullivan of Texans for Fiscal Responsibility. He casts further doubt on proponents' promises that the initiative will transform Texas into a leading biomedical center, creating jobs and spawning more high-end economic development.

"Is it appropriate to use the taxpayers' credit card to do economic development? No. That's a transfer of wealth," he said. "That all sounds nice, but the record of government as venture capitalist is really, really bad."

Mary Katherine Stout, a policy analyst at the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation, said government should limit its efforts to things that only government can do and leave things such as funding cancer research to private investors.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, said Proposition 15 sounds like a good idea, but he has serious concerns about the funding mechanism.

"Traditionally, we don't borrow money except to build infrastructure. This is a fairly significant departure from that," he said.

Also, the state is setting aside \$6 billion in surplus funds to pay for a promised property tax cut, said Scott McCown, executive director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, an Austin think tank that advocates for low-income Texans.

Yet, if it borrows \$3 billion for cancer research rather than tapping into the state's general revenue, taxpayers will have to pay an estimated \$1.6 billion more in interest.

McCown questioned the logic of that policy, saying, "We're borrowing money because we're keeping money in our wallets to fund tax cuts."

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bentfork wrote:

IF we want "value for money" in cancer research we do NOT achieve it by enriching Wall Street bond sales of Goldman Sachs types. That adds more riches to those "proven humanitarians" in the financial sector and less to the cancer research community. Senator Steve Ogden & some fiscal conservatives had compelling arguments & statistics to back them up in the debate on the floor of the Senate when this bill was winding it way through the well meaning proponents. How you achieve the end is as important as the end goal. I am a cancer survivor who will not be persuaded simply by good intentions.

10/7/2007 12:40:53 PM

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Cassandra42 wrote:

"...pay(!)for a promised property tax cut.", "fund(!) tax cuts."? This is revealing language. Truly, the time has come for zero-based budgeting in Texas and, failing that, referendum-and-initiative! The cancer research is probably very worthy. Finance it with tax-free bonds, to be retired with proceeds from new drugs. Offer the bonds to the general public and not just the fatcats, and advertise them in public service announcements. This is the way we funded much of WW2.

10/7/2007 8:54:57 AM

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InGodWeTrust wrote:

I'll vote FOR this IF I and my family receive free cancer treatment. I am tired of "footing the bill" for professionals to use the money to build their bank accounts and still have to pay for what I receive, just like the toll road.

10/7/2007 5:10:12 AM

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