

Voters asked to OK measures for rural areas, roads, DPS

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Bailey and Crosby counties may be about 100 miles apart, but both rural West Texas communities have a lot in common. They are roughly the same size, have about the same population and a good number of their buildings are neglected or abandoned.

They are not the only blighted areas in the region. In some rural West Texas communities, abandoned or decaying structures are a common sight. But those eyesores could be revitalized if Texas voters approve Proposition 5, backers of the measure say.

The proposed amendment, which couldn't go into effect until 2009, would allow municipalities with populations of less than 10,000 to hold an election in which the voters would be asked if the city can freeze taxes on properties in an area targeted for redevelopment.

Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock and other lawmakers said.

DPS building for Lubbock

One is Proposition 4. The measure would authorize the state government to issue up to \$1 billion in bonds for maintenance, construction and equipment purchase, the office of Texas Secretary of State Phil Wilson said. But as the old saying goes, "the devil is in the details."

Included in the \$1 billion is \$37 million for a new, state-of-the-art Texas Department of Public Safety building that would be built on the corner of Yucca Lane and Interstate 27, across from the Lubbock Country Club. Lubbock is the headquarters for DPS Region 5, which has most of West Texas under its jurisdiction, from the state line with New Mexico to Weatherford.

"This proposition means a lot to us," Duncan said. "It's very important that we move the DPS building to a better location."

If the DPS regional office relocates, the downtown area where it is now located would get a much-needed facelift, Duncan and Lubbock business leaders say.

The projected facility, those familiar with the plan say, would be a multi-story building of about 66,000 square feet, almost twice as big as the current facility in downtown Lubbock. It would house the driver license division, a DNA lab, an automotive shop and a radio equipment shop, which would serve the needs of DPS Region 5 and be of help to the rest of the state in case of emergencies like hurricanes Katrina and Rita two years ago. It also would have a helicopter hangar.

Money for rural highways

And then, there is Proposition 12, which asks voters to approve the issuance of up to \$5 billion in bonds for highway improvements, including rural West Texas highways, Duncan said.

"The passage of Proposition 12 would go a long way to ensure that our rural Texas roads are maintained and keeping them in good order," Duncan said. "If we don't pass it, we would suffer. This is investing in our future."

Lawrence Olsen, treasurer for the Safer Roads Coalition, an Austin-based political action committee, agreed.

"This money is for the entire the state, but this proposition is very important for West Texas because funding for rural projects is hard to get," Olsen said.

He cited a recent warning the Texas Transportation Department issued saying there is little money for new road projects, mainly because of a recent toll-road ban, loss of federal funding and a gasoline tax of 19 cents a gallon, which has not been increased in more than a decade.

No opposition for bonds, snag for tax freeze

So far, there is little or no statewide opposition to Propositions 4 and 12, even though both proposed amendments ask the voters to approve a total of \$6 billion in bonds.

Officials at the liberal Center for Public Policy Priorities and the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation, two Austin-based think tanks, said though the Legislature is asking voters to approve \$5 billion for highway improvements, they are neither in favor nor against Proposition 12.

Proposition 4 doesn't seem to have any major opposition either.

The same goes for Proposition 5, which would freeze property taxes on abandoned or neglected buildings. However, even if it is approved, the measure cannot go into effect until 2009 at the earliest. That's because Senate Bill 1336, a companion bill to Senate Joint Resolution 44, the bill that put the proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot, was not voted by the Texas House. That should be taken care in the 81st legislative session, which starts in January of 2009, the Secretary of State's office said.

"This happens from time to time," Wilson's spokeswoman Ashley Burton said.

"It's a good bill," said Rep. Joe Heflin, D-Crosbyton whose House District 85 is largely rural. "I hope the voters approve it because it could revitalize a good number of small, rural communities."

"This proposition could help us a lot," Bailey County Commissioner Juan Chavez said of Muleshoe, where he lives. "We have too many abandoned or neglected buildings here."

Proposition 5 may have a big impact on West Texas, but there are two others that can benefit the region just as much and the voters should approve them, Heflin,

There are times when a proposition is put on the ballot even though one chamber didn't get to vote on it, Burton said. However, if the voters approve it, the amendment will go back to the Legislature for final approval.

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