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Tuesday, December 11, 2007

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STORY TRAY

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Story last updated at 2:48 a.m. Sunday, December 2, 2007

Insurance junkies, TV football, new races, appointments all in the mix

AUSTIN - This may be of little consolation to Dallas Cowboys fans who missed last week's game between their team and the Green Bay Packers because their cable TV didn't televise it, but on Dec. 10, the House Regulated Industries Committee will hear public testimony on the National Football League-cable TV dispute.

State Rep. John Smithee, R-Amarillo, who sits on that committee, does not think the panel has any business getting involved in the dispute.

"This is a classic case of corporate greed," Smithee said. "All the NFL and the cable company are interested in is getting more money. It's the poor guy, the fan, who ends up paying for their greed."



Robin O'Shaughnessy

Enrique Rangel

West Texas will be well represented at the hearing because Rep. David Swinford, R-Dumas, also sits on the nine-member panel. Stay tuned.

Candidate registration begins

Tired of so many presidential debates? Well, it is time for even more politicking. Starting Monday, candidates for state offices can begin registering for the March 4 primary.

Although everyone in the Panhandle/South Plains legislative delegation plans to seek another term, Rep. Delwin Jones said he will file for re-election on Monday. The Lubbock Republican said he doesn't know whether he'll have another well-funded challenger like last time.

The candidates have 30 days to register.

Insurance dispute unsettled

Smithee is breathing another sigh of relief.

While for most Texans, Friday was the last day of another workweek or perhaps a Christmas shopping day, for the Amarillo Republican it was a date he never forgets - the last day of the hurricane season.

"We dodged another bullet," said Smithee, who chairs the House Insurance Committee. "Since Alicia (in 1983) we've been defying the odds. It is not a question if we get hit again. It is a question of when."

Since 1995, when he introduced the first in a series of bills aimed at avoiding a windstorm insurance crisis in the state, Smithee has been worrying that a major hurricane like Katrina or Rita would devastate the Texas Gulf Coast. And if that were the case, the insurance companies doing business in the state would run out of money and would not be able to cover all claims, leaving policyholders as far away as the Panhandle and the South Plains unprotected.

But in session after session, Smithee's windstorm insurance bills were derailed.

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This year, his House Bill 2960, which Perry, Dewhurst and House Speaker Tom Craddick strongly supported, looked like it was going to pass easily. However, in the last day of the session, Sen. Mike Jackson, R-La Porte, in the Houston-Galveston area, killed it with the threat of a filibuster - a process in which a senator talks non-stop until the clock runs out.

Jackson, who along with Smithee and other windstorm insurance experts participated in a recent forum in Austin sponsored by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a think tank, said he killed HB 2960 because it was unfair to Gulf Coast homeowners. However, if both lawmakers can work out those disagreements, he will work with Smithee to see that there is windstorm legislation next time, Jackson promised.

That remains to be seen because Smithee and other windstorm insurance experts said at the panel and at an Insurance Committee hearing during the session that the disagreement boils down to homeowners on the coast wanting to be subsidized by insurance policyholders in the state. Since they live in high-risk areas, coast residents should pay more for their coverage, the experts said.

"A lot of people in the coast have become addicted to low-cost insurance," Smithee said. "They basically want subsidized insurance."

State appointments made

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst has appointed Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, to the Medicaid Reform Legislative Oversight Committee, an important committee that manages substantial responsibility over Medicaid reform.

And Gov. Rick Perry appointed Randall County Sheriff Joel Richardson to the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education, which ensures that Texans are served by highly trained and ethical law enforcement and corrections personnel.

ENRIQUE RANGEL writes for The A-J Austin Bureau. For comment, write to enrique.rangel@morris.com or P.O. Box 12457, Austin, TX 78711-2457.

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