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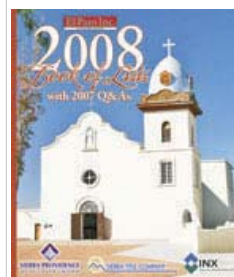
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Slow going in Texas House

By Ryan Poulos
El Paso Inc. Austin Bureau



state Rep. Joe Pickett. "It doesn't take us long to pick up the pace and in the next 10 days we could be right up there."

By this point in the last session, the House had seen a total of 6,190 bills filed, with passage of 328 bills and five constitutional amendments. The Senate had approved 423 bills and three constitutional amendments.

"Passing bills means you're either restricting someone or raising a fee for someone else," he said. "There's only a few bill each session that actually give people more freedom."

Justin Keener, vice president of policy and communications for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, agrees with Pickett.

"While the media and some pundits decry the slower pace, the truth is that less is typically better – for taxpayers – because legislators attempting to 'fix' problems typically do so by limiting freedom, redistributing hard-earned money and expanding government programs, or simply making it more difficult to earn an honest living," he said. "If Texas is to recover from the economic downturn, government needs to stay out of the way, rather than stepping in and making things worse."

Speaker slowdown

Some say the House slowdown is related to a change in style.

Under the leadership of new Speaker Joe Straus, House members are spending more time debating the merits of certain policies. That's resulted in slower advancement of bills than under the authoritarian rule of previous Speaker Tom Craddick.

"The process is actually working better than it did under the former administration because there isn't just a number of hand-picked bills ready to push through," Rep. Tommy Merritt (R-Longview) told a reporter last week.

Gov. Rick Perry also said not to worry about the House's current pace.

Lawmakers have also had to spend time working on the unique situation of the stimulus dollars that have recently come the state's way.

"Sometimes it's slow. Sometimes it's fast," he said. "They'll get their work done."

AUSTIN – Talk about a slowdown.

Last week, Democrats in the Texas House scheduled a news conference to talk about why there's been such a delay in getting important issues to the House floor.

Then they delayed the news conference, indefinitely.

House members were too busy with the day's long list of committee meetings – where bills make their first stop on the way to the House floor.

Last week marked the halfway mark of the legislative session – the 70th day of the 140 the Legislature is allowed by law to meet. And even though things started picking up, the buzz was all about the slow pace of the House.

As of last week, more than 7,000 bills had been filed and the Senate has passed 81, roughly its usual pace. But over in the House, members were just taking up the first bills.

"We may be starting off slower, but we've passed more bills out of committee than the Senate has," said El Paso

Downside of special

There's talk around the Capitol that a special session may be called to get everything done. That's news that most representatives don't want to hear. They are paid just \$7,200 per year and would rather get back to their districts with their families and regular, fulltime jobs.

Pickett said he's heard talk about a special session, but it isn't anything new.

"This is my eighth session and I've heard that rumor every single time," he said. "There won't be a special session."

Political writer Harvey Kronberg, who has observed Texas politics for 20 years, said the chances are slim.

"What typically happens is by the end of April, everyone is saying that the wheels are coming off," he said. "Then what happens is the legislative leaders on all sides – the governor, speaker of the House and lieutenant governor all get together and cut a deal and try to impose their will on their various institutions."

In order to have a special session, the governor must issue a proclamation stating the session's exact agenda. Then legislators have 30 days to get back to Austin.

"Everyone essentially sits around doing nothing, which creates bad press – and of course, the whole thing costs more money, which is also bad press," Kronberg said. "It also gives the governor the opportunity to work further on any pet projects or issues that he wants to inflame. Overall, there's a lot of downside to a special session."

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