

Amid talk about past, a few plans from GOP governor hopefuls

Three Republican rivals have put forth policy proposals, some more detailed than others.

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The Republican candidates for governor have spoken with varying levels of detail about what they'd like to do over the next four years if they actually get the job.

The GOP race has instead centered largely on what candidates have done in the past. U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison says Gov. Rick Perry has allowed special interests to control his agenda. Perry says Hutchison has adopted the spendthrift ways of Washington. And activist Debra Medina says both have lost sight of the Constitution.

Proposals for the future have been pushed to the back burner, and that's not unusual. After all, it's the Legislature that actually writes laws, not the governor. And voters and the media tend to get most excited about emotional issues and broad themes.

"Voters really don't have the time for it," said Democratic consultant Jason Stanford, who managed Chris Bell's 2006 gubernatorial campaign.

"Voters could understand policy, but they choose not to spend their time investigating political positions of candidates," Stanford said. "Policy helps you with interest groups who endorse and give money, and it helps with newspaper editorial boards."

Plus, Stanford said, candidates who propose policy solutions instantly open themselves to attacks.

Hutchison has offered much more detailed policy proposals than her two Republican opponents.

For example, she has a 14-bullet-point transportation plan that would reform how private companies can go about building toll roads, stress local input in planning decisions and retool the management of the Texas Department of Transportation.

Medina, by contrast, speaks in broad terms about a few big ideas.

For example, she seeks a revolutionary change in state tax policy by abolishing the property tax. But even small changes in tax policy can turn into enormous, prolonged fights at the Capitol.

Perry has put forth a number of ideas about where to take the state over the next four years, but several of them are rather small changes.

For example, the state now requires teens to show they are enrolled in school in order to get driver's licenses. Perry wants the students to show that they are actually working toward their diplomas.

Other issues that Perry has talked about on the trail would require action outside of Texas. For instance, he wants an amendment to the U.S. Constitution requiring a balanced federal budget, but Texas could not make that happen alone.

Below are some of the specific proposals that each Republican campaign has put forth.

Rick Perry

- Spending restrictions: Perry wants voters to approve a pair of constitutional amendments aimed at limiting spending.

One would say spending could not grow faster than the combined increase in population rate and inflation that year, unless voters approved. The other would require a two-thirds vote of the Legislature, instead of a simple majority, for any state tax increase.

The two-year state budget has grown from \$98 billion to \$182 billion in the decade since Perry became governor. That figure includes state and federal spending.

He has twice signed budgets that reduced state spending, but one of those came last year, when lawmakers balanced the budget with billions of dollars from the Obama administration's stimulus package.

- Employer sanctions for hiring illegal immigrants: Perry said last fall that he would "press for criminal penalties for employers who knowingly violate employment laws by hiring workers who are in Texas illegally." In the 2006 campaign, he opposed such sanctions.

Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond said that immigration is a federal issue and that it would be unfair to sanction employers when they don't have effective verification systems.

"What does knowingly mean?" asked Hammond, whose group has endorsed Perry despite its opposition to the sanctions. "If an employer is presented with documents that appear to be correct, then they're put in a position of having to accept those documents."

- Expansion of virtual schools: Perry wants to expand the Virtual School Network, which allows students who have dropped out of school or attend schools with limited course work available to take online courses to work toward graduation.

Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association said the state has set up a virtual-school network with important safeguards in place so that professional teachers are behind the software and the schools don't just become so-called diploma mills that allow students to avoid rigorous instruction.

On the other hand, Perry's call for the Legislature to expand the program by \$5 million offers enough money to serve less than 1 percent of the state's high school population.

Kay Bailey Hutchison

- E-learning devices: Hutchison wants to give students devices similar to electronic readers, such as the Amazon Kindle, to use for reading, completing assignments and taking tests.

Students could carry them around in backpacks, and teachers could program the devices with individually tailored assignments.

Hutchison has been vague about how to pay for these devices. Her campaign has noted that electronic content could cost less over time than printing textbooks.

But in addition for paying for the hardware and software for millions of students to use them, the state or local school districts would have to spend considerable time training teachers to use them.

There have been efforts to move toward electronic materials for years. It is not a fast process.

- Limit political activities by regulators: Political appointees should not seek campaign contributions from the people they regulate, Hutchison says.

This practice came to light when Jose Cuevas Jr., the Perry-appointed chairman of the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, wrote a letter to restaurant owners inviting them to attend a Perry fundraiser. The letter did not mention Cuevas' post atop the commission.

"I know all these guys. It's who I am — I'm a restaurateur, and all I'm doing is signing my name with other restaurateurs saying please join us," Cuevas told the Midland Reporter-Telegram.

Hutchison also wants to bar political appointees from lobbying the industries they regulate for endorsements of the politician who appointed him or her.

- Check employment eligibility of state workers: Hutchison proposes requiring Texas to use the federal E-Verify system to check the immigration status of new state employees. During the second GOP gubernatorial debate, she called the online program "the best system that we have" to check workers' immigration status.

The Department of Homeland Security program is used by about 183,500 employers nationwide — including Hutchison's office — but not by the State of Texas.

Texas now uses the federal I-9 form, which certifies that employers have checked documents such as Social Security cards to ensure that employees (citizens or not) are eligible to work in the United States.

But E-Verify goes a step further by trying to verify whether such documents are authentic.

The program isn't perfect. PolitiFact Texas reported that 0.3 percent of workers have successfully contested instances when their documents did not match E-Verify records.

Bill Hammond of the Texas Association of Business said e-Verify is unreliable.

Debra Medina

- Nullifying federal laws: Medina says that Texas should say "no" to federal mandates on issues such as agriculture, education and health care.

"It is our duty as a state to recognize when Washington, D.C., is stepping outside its constitutional bounds," she wrote on her Web site.

The nullification concept has picked up support from people around the country who say that the 10th Amendment allows states to nullify federal laws because it says that the "powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

But critics of nullification say that the Constitution's Supremacy Clause (which says that federal laws "shall be the supreme Law of the Land") makes it clear that states cannot overturn federal law.

- Eliminating property taxes: Medina believes that until property taxes are eliminated, Texans can't truly own property. "We've forgotten that ownership is an essential element of freedom," she writes on her Web site.

Her proposal would make Texas the only state not to have local property taxes, according to the Washington-based nonprofit Tax Foundation.

Medina would replace the money by broadening the sales tax, and under her proposal, the state would redistribute sales tax dollars to local governments.

The combined state and local sales tax rate is now 8.25 percent. Medina cites a Texas Public Policy Foundation study that says an average sales tax rate of 14.5 percent would generate as much as the current property and sales tax.

The study says that applying the sales tax to more services and to real estate sales (as Medina has suggested) would mean a tax rate of 9 percent. But critics of that study say the research is based on outdated figures and low-balls what the new rate could be.

And critics of Medina's proposal say that local taxpayers would lose a key element of control over local governments and that low-income Texans would bear a disproportionate share of the cost of government.

- No state services for illegal immigrants: Medina proposes prohibiting the use of state money for services for undocumented immigrants.

One of her targets: The 2001 state law signed by Gov. Rick Perry that allows illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition at state universities as long as they have graduated from a Texas high school and lived in Texas for at least three years.

"The state is paying illegals for their education, and that's not fair," Medina campaign manager Penny Langford Freeman said.

Supporters of the law say that because Texas educates illegal immigrants at public schools (as required by the federal government), it makes sense to allow them to pay what other Texans pay to attend state

universities.

As for other services, illegal immigrants are not eligible to enroll in programs such as Medicaid, though the federal-state health insurance program does reimburse hospitals for emergency care for illegal immigrants.

"We have to stop the incentives" to enter the country illegally, Langford Freeman said.

But Austin immigration lawyer Dan Kowalski said: "As far as I know, no one comes here for the benefits. They come here to work."

Additional material from staff writers Kate Alexander and Tim Eaton.

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