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[Home](#) > [Opinion](#) > [Opinion Columnist](#) > [Guest Opinion Columnist](#) > Texas' prosperity up to Legislature

Texas' prosperity up to Legislature

Created Feb 27 2011 - 12:00am

AUSTIN - In November, Texans seeking a strong future delivered a mandate to their elected leaders.

The Texas Legislature has a historic opportunity to increase our state's prosperity. It will succeed to the extent that it continues Texas' commitment to free markets and limited government.

As such, earlier this month the Texas Public Policy Foundation released "Keeping Texas Competitive," a road map for how our state leaders should position Texas for future greatness.

Today's budget challenges are formidable, but we have been here before. In 2003, the Legislature closed a \$10 billion budget shortfall by cutting spending rather than raising taxes. That decision laid the groundwork for Texas to lead the nation in economic growth and job creation during the last decade.

Even today, Texas' economy continues to gain strength relative to other large states.

Reducing Texas' tax and spending burden should be the top priority of the Legislature. By balancing the budget, spending only available revenue, reforming the tax and expenditure limit, and creating greater transparency in expenditures, Texas can secure its future prosperity.

Resisting federal overreach should also be high on the must-do list. The federal government is intruding on areas that should be left up to the state and its citizens, particularly health care and the environment. Medicaid threatens to bankrupt our state - and every other - while the Environmental Protection Agency bureaucracy has Texas' energy and manufacturing sectors in its cross hairs.

In health care, freedom can be preserved by reducing Texas' dependence on federal funding and by reducing health care spending without sacrificing quality of care.

As the only state to say "no" to greenhouse gas controls, Texas can resist further federal overreach by strengthening our authority over state environmental law and preventing efforts to regulate carbon dioxide and green energy subsidies and mandates.

Texans care deeply about their children's education. However, the exponential growth in education spending has not been reflected in student academic performance. We have committed enough money to support education, but those funds are being spent unproductively.

Fostering competition is the key to effective educational growth and reform. Just as you shouldn't be assigned a doctor because of your ZIP code, parents should be free to choose their child's education provider.

Great teachers - whether in our K-12 classrooms or our public colleges and universities - should

make a lot more money, while mediocre or indifferent teachers shouldn't be on the payroll, period. Lifting restrictions on charter and virtual schools will provide parents and students with even more choices to fit their own needs.

Finally, the Texas Legislature should use its 140 days in session this year to continue fostering a free-market economy. Governments don't create jobs; entrepreneurs do. And entrepreneurs want to live, work and create jobs in Texas because our state gives them the best opportunity to succeed or fail on their own merits.

While Texas has some of the most entrepreneur-friendly policies in the country, there is room for improvement. Our legislators should eliminate the last vestiges of price regulation in homeowners' insurance and telecommunications products, and reduce bureaucratic interference in our competitive electricity market.

Legislators should also ban the use of eminent domain for takings that are not a public use, increase consumer choice in health care and avoid criminalizing nonfraudulent business activities or licensing new occupations.

At our Policy Orientation event earlier this month, Gov. Rick Perry and I had the privilege to welcome our newest fellow Texans. A couple from California had grown weary of an intrusive, expensive and dysfunctional state government, and they voted with the feet in favor of economic opportunity.

It would be a shame for them to come all this way only to have Texas become what they left behind.

That's why Texans deserve to have all of the "Keeping Texas Competitive" recommendations fully debated and ultimately passed by the Texas Legislature - so the Lone Star will keep shining as a beacon of opportunity. That's not just good for Texas; it's good for America.

Brooke Rollins is president and CEO of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, based in Austin.

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