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Budget Notes: Ogden, Pitts Plan Weekend Vote

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Rep. Sylvester Turner D-Houston, speaks with Sen. Steve Ogden R-Bryan during finance committee hearing on May 23rd, 2011

State Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, talked with reporters shortly before the Senate began its afternoon session today. Here's a quick rundown of what he had to say:

- Even Ogden doesn't know the final numbers in the budget, except the state is slated to spend about \$80.6 billion from taxpayer revenue. All funds will likely total about \$175 billion, but that's just an estimate. They'll vote on HB 4 — the supplemental appropriations bill to cover the current budget's deficit — on

Wednesday in the Senate; the conference committee will vote on final budget report on Thursday morning.

- Ogden basically said the Rainy Day Fund door hasn't closed. "The number we'll eventually settle on is the number is the number we'll need to make all this balance, and it can change depending on what happens with 1811."
- The family planning dollars look like they'll be much closer to the House's plan (\$37 million vs. \$100 million in Senate). In addition, it looks like the Women's Health Program will expire.
- Windham School District funding serving inmates in the correction system will be slashed, but Ogden says it'll still be able to function.

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- Higher ed will suffer, but it's a "second priority" compared to the ballooning costs of Medicaid. The reality? "It's just going to be harder for poor kids to go to college. ... I think we can live with it, but I prefer it not happen," he said, adding, "How Medicaid goes, so goes the rest of the state budget."

- Border security and driver's licenses — the House went with the Senate's suggestions and increased funding. Fees have been too low for what people want.

- SB 1811 — Both Duncan and Pitts know where they're "gonna meet" in the middle. With deferrals, the bill is supposed to raise \$3.5 billion. He doesn't know if a smoking ban will stand and doesn't want to speculate. (The Senate version of this "non-tax revenue" bill was priced at \$4.2 billion; the House version was \$2.6 billion and didn't include any accelerated tax payments. Some of those could return.)

- On state jobs: Shouldn't be more than natural attrition and not filling vacancies.

- On school jobs: State will send enough money to the districts. They "may reduce personnel, but that's not the only option." They're not out of options — they can ask for a tax increase. He doesn't think so passing the buck: "It's fair because I'm not MAKING them. If they can

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convince voters, it's okay with me."

• On outside interests: Joked he asks his wife for her advice. "I don't want to go there," but there's "no question" the Texas Public Policy Foundation had an influence. How much? He wouldn't say.

State Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, had this to say about the budget negotiations a short time later:

• On the budget conference committee adopting a funding figure for family planning programs for low-income women closer to the amount called for in the House budget (\$37 million) versus the higher number provided in the Senate budget (\$100 million): "Well, that's what the House wanted to do. ... I don't know how many members came to tell me what they wanted in family planning, and what they wanted was the House version."

• On the Rainy Day Fund, which Ogden indicated should be the final number decided on by lawmakers to balance the budget (the Senate's attempt to withdraw an additional \$855 million from the account has already failed once on the House side): "I think we have to go at the House number or as close to the House number as we can" (which is \$3.1 billion; the Senate number is close to \$4 billion, and there is \$9.4 billion available in that fund, according to the comptroller.)

• On when a budget will be passed: "I think we can do it this weekend. We're depending on [the Legislative Budget Board]. By Thursday morning, we do a conference committee meeting; 48 hours start then."

• On state employees and layoffs: "I'm not going to say some public school employees won't lose their jobs, because some probably will. But our funding level is a lot better than when it left the House."

• On local districts possibly asking voters to approve a local tax increase: "I hope that doesn't happen, but I mean — school districts have money of their own."

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