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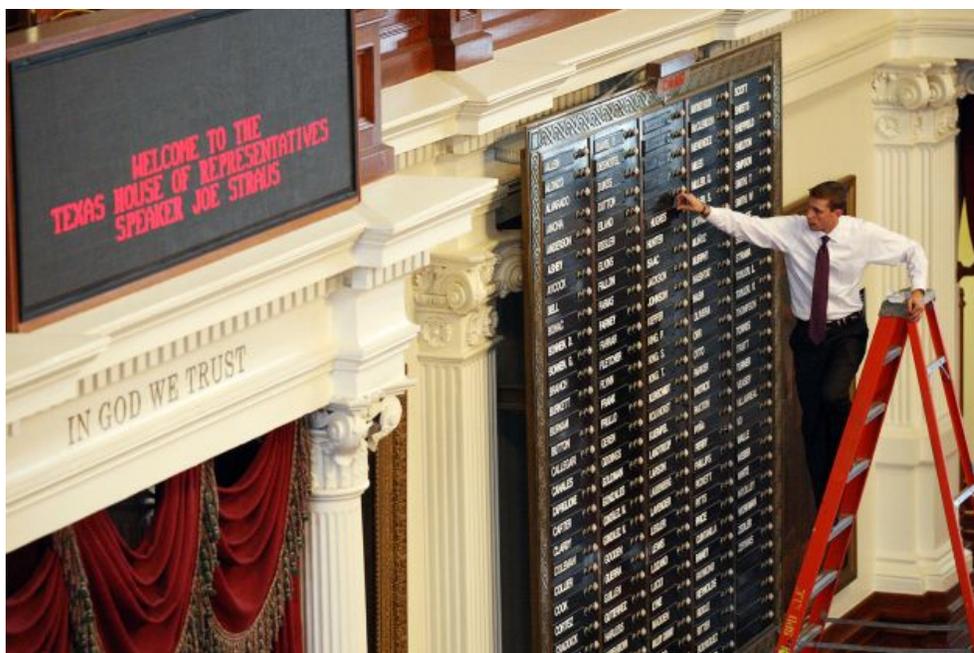


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Conservatives seek to redirect wasteful spending

James Quintero, For the Express-News
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A state budget bill is headed for the House floor and attracting a lot of attention. Photo: Jerry Lara, San Antonio Express-News

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As the old saying goes, everything's bigger in Texas — even the state budget.

Lawmakers are currently hard at work finalizing a two-year budget that will likely come in just south of \$200 billion, representing a marked increase from last session when the Legislature passed an appropriations bill that totaled just \$173.5 billion.

So what's behind the big-time spending increase?

Part of it has to do with the budget gimmicks that lawmakers employed last session. Another part is that Texas is a fast-growing state whose low tax-and-spend policies are attracting people and businesses by the

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busload, requiring some modest investments in things like roads, water, schools, etc. But a third part – and one that often goes underreported – is that lawmakers have a lot of “wants” and spending on those wants is fast-increasing.

Case in point: the Commission on the Arts. If the House's budget passes as is today, the commission will see a 117 percent increase in state general revenue, or discretionary money. In other words, House budget writers want to more than double spending on the arts, a questionable expense in the first place, let alone one deserving of a huge increase. But even the House's proposed budget for the arts commission still looks better than the Senate's, where the agency would see a whopping 198 percent increase.

Other examples like this permeate the budgets of both houses, and perhaps, depending on your political disposition, they might not be so egregious except that lawmakers on both sides are out in full force calling for higher taxes and more fees on everything from gasoline to beverages to income, much of which will be used to pay for all these spending increases.

For conservatives, this fact has made it difficult to quietly observe the state's budgeting process this session; but there is hope on the horizon. A cadre of Texas freshman legislators has pre-filed a series of budget amendments to redirect spending away from wants and into needs, which in this case is the Teacher Retirement System's unfunded liability.

In essence, these budget amendments would redirect agency and program funding for things such as the Texas Commission on the Arts, the Historical Commission, the Board of Professional Geoscientists and the Egg Inspection program and spend it on ensuring the sustainability of the program supporting retired teachers, something that has become increasingly questionable under the terms of ObamaCare.

This kind of fiscal prudence is to be applauded, and conservatives should rally around these members, because finally it appears that lawmakers with a sense of priorities have stepped up to the table.

In the words of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair: “It is not an arrogant government that chooses priorities, it's an irresponsible government that fails to choose.”

James Quintero is a senior policy analyst for the Center for Fiscal Policy with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin.



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