

Senator Judith Zaffirini



Reports to the Families of District 21

Dear Friends:

In the movie, *Bernie*, a character explains in a humorous aside that Texas is *five different states*.

This evokes the diversity of Senate District 21: a diversity of geography, stretching from the Rio Grande to the Colorado River, from borderlands to ranchlands, suburbs and cities; and a diversity of economic activity, from the transportation and logistics hubs in Laredo, the largest international port of entry in North America, to the oil and gas wells of the Eagle Ford Shale and to the booming technology sector of the Texas Innovation Corridor between San Antonio and Austin. Above all, Senate District 21 showcases the diversity of persons who call Texas home.

I am delighted to represent this rich assemblage in the Texas Senate, and this is reflected in the bills I will file during the 2025 legislative session.

These bills will advance the interests and concerns of the more than 906,000 persons who live in communities across our district, including the counties of Caldwell, Dimmit, Duval, Jim Hogg, Karnes, La Salle, Live Oak, McMullen, Starr, Webb, Wilson and Zapata; and parts of Bexar, Guadalupe, Hays and Travis.

Despite this multitude of interests and concerns, many of my bills are influenced by a common image: a hardworking Texas family sitting at its kitchen table. This family seeks well-paying jobs to put food on the table and to cover the mortgage or rent.

They worry about protecting their homes and keeping the lights on during extreme weather without facing



FAMILY INSPIRES SENATOR JUDITH ZAFFIRINI to do her best for the families of Senate District 21. A devoted wife, mother and grandmother, she shares traditional values with her husband and son, Carlos Sr. and Jr.; daughter-in-law, Audrey; and grandsons, Asher (7) and George (5).

exorbitant increases in insurance and electricity costs, and they want their children to attend excellent schools and be prepared for college, which will create new opportunities for them. Most important, some fear having to weigh the cost of these priorities against keeping themselves and their loved ones healthy.

Please read this newsletter as an invitation to come sit at this table. Share with us your concerns

and be bold in expressing your ideas for making our communities—your community—and our state a better place.

My staff and I will consider every proposal diligently. In fact, some of my best legislation was suggested by constituents. What's more, we will continue to respond to every letter, email and telephone call and meet with constituents in the district or at the Capitol as requested. Effective communication makes me a better senator.

As we exchange ideas before the 2025 legislative session, my prayer is for the Lord to bless us all with grace and good will, family and friendship, and health and happiness as we forge a better future for our children and grandchildren.

May God bless Texas!

Judith Zaffirini

Judith Zaffirini

State Senator, District 21

Dean of the Texas Senate

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1. JERRY HAUG AND WAYNE WALTHER DISCUSS A VARIETY OF LOCAL ISSUES in Caldwell County with Senator Judith Zaffirini. 2. Travis County educators from KinderCare on South Congress briefing her about challenges they face in the classroom are (L-R) Alison May; Kayla Godinez, director; Elanna Yalow, vice chair and senior advisor; Jacian Lewis, district leader; and Margot Gould Grant.

Senator Judith Zaffirini: 1st Woman Dean of Texas

When the 89th Texas Legislature convenes on Jan. 14, Senator Judith Zaffirini will begin her first regular session as the first woman Dean of the Texas Senate, succeeding 24 men who held that position since 1909. She also was the first Mexican American woman elected to the 31-member body.

In 1987 she and Senator Eddie Bernice Johnson were the 7th and 8th

of 25 women who have served with 952 men since 1846. The milestone evokes mixed feelings. “I’m proud to be the first,” she responds, “but saddened it took so long.”

The Dean of the Senate is the longest-serving and, therefore, highest-ranking senator. The position entails presiding over the caucus of the whole—that is, when members meet outside of session

or beyond the Senate chamber—and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative matters, including making opening and closing motions.

“In this capacity,” Dean Zaffirini said, “I will continue to promote bipartisanship; foster friendships; and uphold the traditions, protocol and decorum of the Senate.”

Assuming these responsibilities has been a seamless transition. Indeed, often referred to as the “Dean-in-Waiting” as the second highest-ranking senator for 16 years, she willingly has shared her knowledge and skills. In January, for example, she will publish the 15th edition of her presiding guide. This handbook provides scripts for presiding over the Senate and its committees and outlines key protocols for getting bills passed.

As Betty King, former Secretary of the Senate, famously remarked: The Dean is the Senate’s “Papa Bear.” Her successor, Patsy Spaw, noted Dean Zaffirini is now the “Mama Bear.”



CHILDREN WHO VISIT SENATOR JUDITH ZAFFIRINI AT THE STATE CAPITOL OR IN LAREDO always are the best part of her day. Hunter, Hank and Heidi join their parents, County Judge James and Shelley Liska, for Live Oak County Legislative Day and receive a copy of her children’s handbook, *Welcome to the Texas Senate: This is where I work (and how I got here)*.

Constituents Inform Critical Policymaking for Texas

The Senate’s highest bill-passer for five consecutive sessions, Senator Judith Zaffirini passed 122 bills in 2023. The most significant factor contributing to her record is her constituents.

“My staff and I prioritize responding to constituents and addressing their issues,” Senator Zaffirini said. “Sometimes meeting their needs requires legislative solutions.”

This pipeline of policymaking from the district to the Senate chamber can range from local issues—such as the creation of a special purpose district or authorizing certain county government actions—to legislation impacting the entire state.

After a predatory lending scheme ensnared several Dove Springs residents in Senate District 21—the canary in the coalmine of a broader, statewide problem regarding “wrap mortgages”—for example, Senator Zaffirini passed Senate Bill (SB) 43, which closed these lending loopholes, protecting homeowners across Texas.

The next session, after a constituent was charged more than \$4,000

for his son’s emergency ambulance trip, she passed SB 2476, preventing municipal ambulance services from “surprise billing” practices. This became model legislation nationally.

Pressing issues facing District 21 that are representative of statewide concerns will be at the top of Senator Zaffirini’s agenda again next session.

At the Falcon International Reservoir in Zapata County, one of the most critical water sources in South Texas, water levels are approaching historical lows. She will seek stronger water conservation and efficiency policies, as well as creating a dedicated funding stream in the 2025 state budget to

reinforce water supply and resilience against drought—at Falcon Lake and statewide.

Similarly, as South Texas has among the highest rates of Alzheimer’s in the country, for the 2025 session she and Rep. Richard Raymond hope to establish an institute for the prevention and research of Alzheimer’s.

“I am grateful for constituents’ participation in the policymaking process,” Senator Zaffirini said. “Together we can lead the way for Texas.”



1. QUEENS OF THE ZAPATA COUNTY FAIR, (L-R) Kianna Villarreal, Karyme Arámbula, Emily Martinez, Kiana Villarreal and Monique García meet with Senator Judith Zaffirini before their annual parade. The 4-day celebration includes fun-filled activities for all ages. 2. Accompanied by his nephew, Mitch, Joe R. Long (seated) receives a Texas Senate gavel and Senate Resolution 493, honoring him and the late Dr. Teresa Lozano Long. Their impact on education and the arts is legendary. 3. The delegation celebrating Karnes County Day at the Capitol with the senator includes (L-R) James García, Mari Mitchell and Elsa Cantú. 4. Aimee Crowder (L) and her mother, Amber Holder, discuss Sutherland Springs concerns.

Senator Judith Zaffirini Serves on Interim Committees that Benefit SD 21

The Texas Legislature meets in regular sessions for 140 days in odd-numbered years. Ostensibly, this gives the legislature time during the interim to thoroughly investigate and consider the issues facing Texas. To this end, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick issued interim committee charges and established Nov. 30 as the deadline for the committees to submit reports.

He appointed Senator Judith Zaffirini to the most critical committees in the Texas Senate for the 2023-24 biennium, namely, the Senate Committees on Business and Commerce, Finance, Natural Resources and Economic Development (as Vice Chair) and State Affairs. He also appointed her to the special committees on Grid Reliability Legislative Oversight and on Hurricane and Tropical Storm Preparedness, Recovery and Electricity.

“Thanks to Lt. Gov. Patrick’s appointments,” Senator Zaffirini said, “I will continue to be in position to address the most critical issues facing our district and state. I welcome the opportunity for these committee hearings to develop policy and legislative recommendations for the 89th Texas Legislature that will convene on January 14.”

Finance

Arguably the most important committee, the Senate Committee on Finance writes and oversees the state’s budget. Former Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby described it best when he said



DIMITT COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS PARTICIPATE IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS while visiting the Capitol during session and meeting regularly with legislators. Sharing their insights are (L-R) County Treasurer Oscar Ortiz; Constable Robert Balderas; Auditor Carlos Pereda; Commissioner Valerie Rubalcaba; Gazaan González; Senator Judith Zaffirini, Commissioner José Urenda; County Judge Martha Alicia Gómez Ponce; Richard Ramirez; and Commissioner Juan and Leticia Carmona.

only the appropriations bill had to be passed and “everything else is poetry.”

During the interim the committee is monitoring the implementation of the most significant appropriations made during the 2023 session, including \$5 billion for the Texas Energy Fund to incentivize the development of more dispatchable power plants; \$3 billion for renovating or building new mental health hospitals; \$1.5 billion for a broadband infrastructure fund that will support broadband and telecommunications access for millions of Texans in rural areas; more than \$1.1 billion for the new state water fund; and \$1 billion to expand Texas parks.

Perhaps our most pressing charge is studying the optimal way to cut property taxes in anticipation of future surpluses (which is expected to number in the billions in 2025). Our committee will examine increasing the popular homestead exemption, which lowers property taxes by allowing homeowners to remove part of the appraised value of their homes from taxation. Though currently in practice, increasing this exemption will help alleviate the tax burden for many Texans.

Another property tax-cutting option the committee will study, “compression,” uses

a complex formula in which the state sends money to school districts so they can “compress” the maintenance and operations (M&O) property tax rate they levy.

This strategy is not without risks. As Lt. Gov. Patrick has pointed out, shifting the M&O cost of funding schools almost entirely onto the state via compression would require the Legislature to more than double sales taxes and make cuts elsewhere in the budget.

Natural Resources and Economic Development

The Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development (NRED) monitors the oil and gas industry, the cornerstone of Texas’ robust economy. At our June interim hearing we heard testimony regarding the challenges the industry is facing as a result of new federal regulations.

The restrictions include an indefinite pause on liquefied natural gas export permits and tougher air emission standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Many environmental advocates, however, testified favorably regarding these comprehensive regulations. “I am confident by working together we will be able to strike a meaningful

balance between economic and environmental considerations.” said Senator Zaffirini.

Other interim charges for NRED include studying workforce productivity and the extent to which it can be enhanced.

Strategies for doing so include increasing access to and affordability of childcare; examining local option hotel occupancy taxes; reviewing historical site district designations and how they help preserve Texas’ rich cultural legacy and historical identity; and examining cement production plants, ensuring environmental and community standards are upheld while fostering economic development.

State Affairs

Our Committee on State Affairs is responsible for myriad issues ranging from elections and national security to family and child welfare and the general category of politically charged “social issues.”

The priority interim charge is maintaining election security, which includes identifying potential interferences from and addressing countywide polling issues.

How Texas should regulate Big Tech and foreign entities are being further examined

by the committee, respectively, regarding the impact of social media use on children and evaluating property ownership by persons or entities from foreign nations that have hostile relations with the United States (such as China, Iran, Russia and North Korea).

The committee also is studying the impact of environmental, social and governance (ESG) investing guidelines on state public pensions; monitoring the implementation of Senate Bill 13, which banned the state from contracting with companies that boycott energy companies; and regulating Delta 8 and 9, hemp products with psychoactive properties akin to low-grade marijuana.

Business and Commerce

Our Committee on Business and Commerce (B&C) has significant policy-making responsibility concerning the most pressing economic and financial issues facing Texas businesses and households.

Our interim charges include addressing the rising cost of property and casualty insurance—namely, what is causing these increases, the impact on homeowners and industry, how to better inform consumer coverage decisions and, most important, how to enhance affordability—and adopting a responsible regulatory framework for the rapidly developing technology and commercial application of artificial intelligence.

B&C’s most critical charges involve our electric grid, a topic explored on page 6.



ON STARR COUNTY DAY AT THE CAPITOL, Senator Judith Zaffirini greets (L-R) Mayor Joel Villarreal, Rio Grande City; Rose Benavidez, president, Starr County Industrial Foundation; Robert Valle; Cynthia Fuentes; and Aldolfo Peña.



Elsa Alcorta and Senator Judith Zaffirini embrace during a community reception and meeting in Duval County.



1. SHERIFF ERASMO ALARCON JR. SHARES MEMORIES OF “EL SHERIFE,” the late Sheriff Gilberto Ybañez of Jim Hogg County, with Senator Judith Zaffirini during a beautiful gathering of those who loved him, memorializing his years of public service. 2. McMullen County High School students discuss legislative issues and their career and higher education goals with her.

Legislators Prioritize Fixing the Electric Grid

Since the catastrophic blackouts caused by Winter Storm Uri in 2021, reinforcing the stability of the electric grid has been among the most pressing issues for the Texas Legislature.

With her appointment to the Senate Committee on Business and Commerce (B&C) and the special committees on Grid Reliability Legislative Oversight and Hurricane and Tropical Storm Preparedness, Recovery and Electricity, Senator Judith Zaffirini is in position to help effectuate a more resilient and reliable electric grid.

These issues have been the primary focus of B&C’s preparation for the 2025 legislative session. Given the significant increase in electricity demand that is anticipated in the coming years due to population and economic growth—including burgeoning energy-intensive industries such as bitcoin mining, data centers and hydrogen production—the committee is examining the structural design of the grid and its ability to meet growing demand.

To this end members are monitoring the efficacy of the \$5 billion Texas Energy Fund that was created by the Legislature in 2023 and approved by voters to incentivize the development and rehabilitation of dispatchable power plants.

The committee also is looking at the grid’s electric transmission and distribution system. It is an issue that has come to the fore as a result of the power outages caused by natural disasters—and how to enhance its resiliency while expanding it to meet demand and reduce bottlenecks.

Finally, B&C is exploring a range of power generation sources to enhance grid reliability and sustainability, including nuclear reactors; batteries; and hydrogen, and geothermal resources. These efforts aim to create a more diversified energy portfolio for the future.

“We have a lot of work to do in shoring up our electric grid,” said Senator Zaffirini. “I am committed to continue to study these issues and advance legislation that will ensure the reliability, resiliency, affordability and sustainability of electricity for Texas businesses and families.”



1. KIM ZITNY TALKS SHOP at the Teijin Automotive ribbon-cutting in Guadalupe County with Senator Judith Zaffirini. 2. Christopher Cavazos, vice president of Bexar County Emergency Service District #6, presents a cap to the senator after a Senate Committee on Finance hearing.

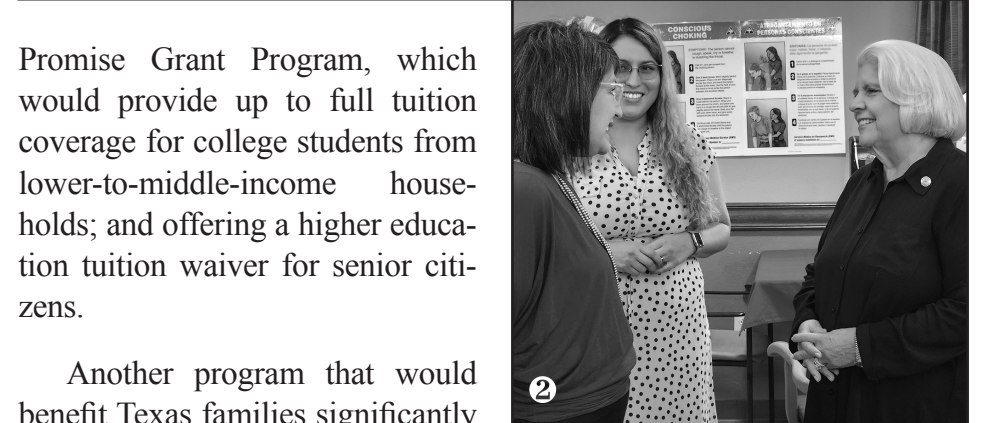
Senator Zaffirini Addresses Kitchen Table Issues

Democrats and Republicans agree the economy and inflation are the most important issues, according to the Texas Politics Project.

“Coupled with education and health and human services, these issues impact Texas families daily and are ripe for discussion at the proverbial kitchen table,” Senator Judith Zaffirini said. “They are the foundation from which we can advance policies that enhance affordability and help families thrive and prepare for a brighter, healthier future.”

Because the centerpiece of these issues is a stable home, the senator and her staff are working on legislation to eliminate “junk fees” in housing, which can cost Texas renters up to hundreds of dollars per month, and using our budget surplus to increase the progressively structured homestead exemption, which reduces the appraisal value for property taxes on behalf of homeowners.

Always prioritizing education, Senator Zaffirini is working on a gamut of issues for learners of all ages, including addressing the shortage of available childcare options, especially in rural and South Texas; establishing universal pre-kindergarten; creating the Texas



Promise Grant Program, which would provide up to full tuition coverage for college students from lower-to-middle-income households; and offering a higher education tuition waiver for senior citizens.

Another program that would benefit Texas families significantly is paid parental leave. She is developing a bill to expand the paid leave program for state employees to include higher ed employees and another creating a paid leave program for parents employed in the private sector.

“When we talk about family values,” Senator Zaffirini said, “we

1. PRESIDENT DR. KELLY DAMPHOUSSE’S LEADERSHIP CLASS from Texas State University in Hays County visits Senator Judith Zaffirini at her Capitol office. 2. Cafecito with the La Salle County Chamber of Commerce features community leaders Myrna Ruiz-Kay (L) and Yadira Salazar as they host Senator Judith Zaffirini’s tour of Las Palmas Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Cotulla.

should address policies that support families’ most pressing issues and their ability to flourish.”

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Webb County Unveils Dean Zaffirini Justice Center

After 16 years as the “Dean-in-Waiting,” or second highest-ranking senator, on Dec. 31, 2023, Senator Zaffirini became the first woman dean of the Texas Senate. Also the first Mexican American woman Texas senator, she succeeds 24 men who held the position since 1909.

The Webb County Commissioners Court soon


thereafter announced the naming of the “Dean Senator Judith Zaffirini Justice Center,” the first local courthouse named for a woman in Texas.

Relatedly, the City of Laredo made her the namesake of a local park that hosts a soccer mini-pitch named in her honor by the U.S. Soccer Foundation and her son.

In 2024 she received the Star of Justice Award from the Texas Access

to Justice Commission, the Orgullo Latino Award from Webb County LULAC Council 22387, the Shirley Bird Perry Longhorn Citizenship Award from the Moody College of Communication’s Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin and the “Champion of Medicine” Award from the Texas Medical Association’s Border Health Caucus.

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2024-2025
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Senator Zaffirini has received more than 1,200 honors and awards for her legislative, civic and professional work, including the National Federation of Press Women’s National Sweepstakes Award for the third time in four years.

In 2025 she hopes to increase her 1,388 total number of bills passed, more than any other legislator in Texas history; and 72,028 consecutive votes cast, a record Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick

said “will never be broken.” She is inspired by her constituents in Senate District 21 and strives to be responsive to their needs and concerns and to communicate with them effectively and transparently regarding the work of Texas’ state government.

Above all, she is inspired by her family—her husband of 59 years, Carlos Sr.; their son, Carlos Jr., and daughter by marriage, Audrey; and her two darling grandsons, Asher (7) and George (5).



EMPOWERING FAMILIES AND CHILDREN: What Senator Judith Zaffirini, aka “Ma Z,” hopes for her beloved grandsons, Asher and George, is what she hopes for all Texas children.