



Capitol Update 5-13-13

Greetings from your Texas Capitol!

I want to send a belated Mother's Day greeting to all the wonderful moms out there. I hope you were able to celebrate this special day with your family just as Matt and I did with Mel.

Around this time every two years, the term *sine die* is often heard throughout the Texas Capitol. *Sine die*, Latin for "without day," is used to indicate that a legislative body is adjourning without assigning a future date on which to gather and conduct business. *Sine die* for the Texas Legislature falls this year on May 27th. With that deadline looming, the House and Senate are working diligently to finalize key pieces of legislation. There aren't many days left this session, but there is still much work ahead, including hearing bills from the corresponding chambers and conducting conference committees on bills already passed by both the House and Senate.

Updates on West, TX

As I mentioned in the last Capitol Update, my staff and I are constantly tracking the aftermath and recovery efforts going on in West. Alongside Representative Kyle Kacal, my House counterpart in representing West, I have found that most of our efforts have focused on facilitating communication between state agencies and the leadership of West and McLennan County. Representative Kacal and I are now working with the offices of Governor Rick Perry, Senate Finance Chairman Tommy Williams and House Appropriations Chairman Jim Pitts to determine what long-term support the state will offer to the city and county as we close out the legislative session and move into the interim period. Last week, Rep. Kacal and I met with the Chairmen and senior officials from the governor's office to discuss specific plans for supporting West in the recovery phase. Following the meeting, we were able to deliver an update via conference call to West Mayor Tommy Muska, Mayor Pro-tem Steve Vanek, McLennan County Judge Scott Felton, County Commissioner Will Jones and County Emergency Management Coordinator Frank Patterson. Though we did not have answers to all of their questions, we were able to provide them with an idea as to how the State will be working with FEMA to help provide funding to the community. You can be proud of the tireless work these men are doing for the City of West.

A Major Step Forward for Public Education

I'm pleased to share with you that the Senate recently passed House Bill 5, a piece of legislation that will have a significant impact on public education in Texas. The two major changes in HB 5 are in the areas of *testing* and *graduation* requirements.

Testing—Throughout the interim and during session, my staff and I have heard an overwhelming number of concerns from educators and parents about the testing burden our students currently face. Currently, high school students are required to take 15 high-stakes, end-of-course exams over the course of their four years. Under HB 5, students would be required to take 5 high-stakes, end-of-course exams. The 5 exams would cover the fundamental areas of English I, English II, Algebra I, Biology, and U.S. History. This new system will allow the state to continue to monitor and hold our public education system accountable while reducing the footprint of state-directed testing in our students' academic lives.

Graduation—We also made significant changes to graduation requirements in HB 5. Currently, students have three options for graduation: minimum, recommended and distinguished. Under HB 5 the state will create a single graduation path for students, called the foundation graduation path, that is an increase in rigor from the current minimum degree plan. A student that graduates under the current minimum degree plan does not fulfill the requirements to apply for college in Texas. However, under the new foundation plan all students will be eligible to attend an institution of higher education. This new Foundation degree program will also give students new options in endorsements for their diploma that reflect a proficiency in a particular field of interest. These endorsements include: business and industry; arts and humanities; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). With these endorsements students will receive an education that is more closely reflects their individual talents and career aspirations. HB 5 also maintains the current distinguished degree path as the most rigorous option for which our students may strive.

By passing HB 5, the Senate sends this bill on to the last major leg of the legislative process: conference committee. The appointed members of the conference committee will now work out the differences between the Senate and House versions of the bill. Should the Governor sign the final version, the legislature will have afforded more class time for teaching rather than encumber our schools for extended testing periods, while still ensuring academic rigor, and afforded students more options which they may pursue in academic specialties or areas of emphasis.

Functional Improvements to the TRS

Last week the Senate voted unanimously to make beneficial changes to the Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS). Senate Bill 1458 will preserve the strength of the TRS retirement fund for the future generation of retired teachers, and does so without overburdening our currently-active teachers. SB 1458 is a balanced effort on behalf of the State of Texas, local Independent School Districts and the active members of the TRS. Additionally, and for the first time in 13 years, we have provided a cost-of-living-adjustment (known as a COLA) to teachers who have been retired more than 15 years. When the original version of SB 1458 was filed, my office received more than 1,200 emails and phone calls from retired teachers. The filed version of SB 1458 went too far in compromising the commitments made to our currently-active teachers when they entered the education profession, but I am proud to say that the final bill-language protects that commitment. Here is a summary of the major changes:

Retirement formula...

- SB 1458 maintains current retirement eligibility for all TRS members who have at least five years of service.
- Currently, the retirement system operates under what is known as the "Rule of 80," where your combined years of service and age must total 80.
- Under the new formula, teachers with less than five years of service as of September 2014 would have to meet the "Rule of 80" but also meet a minimum retirement age of 62. Members could still retire before the age of 62 but would see a 5% reduction—per year—under the age of 62.

Raises the contributions rates...

- Raises the state contribution rate to 6.8 % (currently 6%)
- Gradually raises the active-member contribution rate incrementally from its current 6.4% to 7.7% over the next five years.
- Adds a local ISD contribution of 1.5% if the district does not pay into Social Security. It is left to the local district to choose which avenue of participation.

Provides TRS members with a COLA...

- Members who retired before 1999, approximately 102,000 teachers or 1/3 of current TRS beneficiaries, will receive a 3% COLA in their monthly paychecks. This represents an average monthly increase of \$45-\$100 for each retiree.

Remaining solvent, while providing a financial benefit, is the number one goal of any pension fund. The legislature has committed to providing a benefit to those that have made their life's work serving Texas, and with a strong fund, we are able to do that for many years to come.

Bringing Higher Education Options to Hood County

Representative Phil King and I have authored legislation to officially add Hood County into the Weatherford College service area. This bill enables the Weatherford College to charge a maintenance tax that would allow a campus to be built in Hood County with the purpose of serving local students and families. Hood County is one of only a few Texas counties that was not placed into the service area of a two-year institution of higher education. A well-trained workforce benefits not only Hood County, but the entire state. This bill has support from the Granbury Chamber of Commerce, the Hood County Commissioner's Court, the Granbury City Council, Granbury ISD, the City of Cresson and the Board of Directors of the Granbury Association of Realtors. I'm pleased to be a part of formalizing the relationship between Hood County and Weatherford College, and I look forward to seeing the educational options and opportunities this relationship will bring to local residents.

As always, I encourage you to check out live video coverage of the [House](#) and [Senate](#) and to track legislative activity on the [Texas Legislature Online \(TLO\)](#) website. Until the next Update, I want to say thank you for your interest in the activities of your State Senate office and for your continued support!

God Bless,



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