

OP-ED: "84th Legislative Session Outlook"

Contribution by State Representative Drew Darby

The 84th Texas Legislative Session is now in full swing with committees aggressively tackling their work.

This session presents me with new opportunities to serve you. My workload shifted from writing the \$200+ billion state budget last session to a new assignment on the Ways and Means Committee, where I will work to reduce the tax burden on Texas homeowners and businesses.

I also serve as chairman of the Energy Resources Committee, a very important assignment at a pivotal time for the energy industry and this state. The shale revolution has made American energy independence a reality, but it also brings significant challenges.

In both committees, I am guided by what is good for West Texas and the principles that have kept our state the national jobs leader: low taxes, a predictable regulatory environment, and a fair court system that preserves private property rights and economic opportunity.

In addition to the committee workload, I continue to work on initiatives begun last session to improve truth in budgeting and taxation.

Last session, I authored and passed House Bill 7 which eliminated a fee on electricity bills, lowered fees on your home insurance and trash collection, and instituted fundamental budget reforms to improve how the state budgets fees collected for a dedicated purpose. This reform reduced the burden of runaway state fees on citizens by more than \$1 billion.

This session, I will introduce a new House Bill 7 that will continue to cut fees that bring in excessive revenue for their dedicated purpose. The list of targets vary widely from professional licensing and motorcycle fees to a continued effort to lower the charges on your electricity bill.

The Texas Constitution charges the Ways and Means Committee with jurisdiction over taxes. Reforms, exemptions and reductions will be debated to determine how to improve our tax structure to benefit the economy and keep Texas competitive for jobs, capital investment, and trade.

I am working on legislation to preserve your right to protest your property tax appraisal, to pay your property taxes in installments should you choose to do so, and to incentivize job-training and capital renovation for Texas businesses.

Governor Greg Abbott charged this committee to reduce both business and property taxes, and I am working closely with his office to deliver cuts that are meaningful, sustainable, and beneficial to the long-term needs of Texas.

The Energy Committee will consume much of my time this session as legislative action is needed to resolve a rush to the courthouse in cities across the state.

As some cities move to substantially curtail drilling, the predictable regulation and certainty that has governed oil and gas operations in this state for more than 100 years is in flux. In each case, cities are confronting fundamental questions related to how their actions will affect property rights and whether their decision can hold up to court scrutiny.

It will require legislative action to return to the balance we had a only a few short years ago between the state encouraging recovery of oil and gas beneath our feet and the obligations of cities to ensure safe and orderly development within their jurisdictions.

This is a complex issue that my committee, along with numerous stakeholders and other elected officials, will work on diligently to hopefully resolve the issue before the session ends in June.

As chairman of the Energy Committee, I also will prioritize bills that address funding for state and county roads in energy-producing regions. The safety of our roads in West Texas has suffered substantially due to heavier truckloads and higher traffic counts. In fairness, the wealth that is being taken out of our area should provide for the needs of our area first before state budget writers use it for other areas of the state.

The traffic risks and degradation of our infrastructure is a growing danger that creates additional costs that threaten the lives of people who live and work in energy-producing areas and could jeopardize future oil development.

Investments in West Texas roads, healthcare, and education are good for the energy industry, which has been very good to the state tax coffers. Fixing infrastructure that is critical for the production of oil and promotes public safety is simply the right thing to do.

My office is open to you and I look forward to hearing from you. If you are in Austin, please do not hesitate to visit your state capitol and see the office for House District 72. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you and the State of Texas.

Rep. Darby represents Texas House District 72, which is comprised of Coke, Concho, Glasscock, Howard, Irion, Reagan, Runnels, Sterling, and Tom Green Counties. In the 84th Texas Legislative Session, he serves as Chairman of the House Energy Resources Committee and as a member of the House Ways & Means Committee.