

# Weekly Legislative Report

## 2.4.21



### GOVERNOR:

#### **Governor's Strategies to Support Small Business**

On January 26, Governor Greg Abbott held a listening session in San Antonio with construction workers, small business leaders, and advocates to discuss how Texas can better support small businesses and workers in the wake of COVID-19. Following the listening session, the governor held a brief press conference to provide a summary of the discussion and outlined proposed legislative strategies to ensure a more prosperous future for the state of Texas. During the listening session, Governor Abbott and participants discussed strategies on how to grow the Texas economy and help business owners and workers impacted by COVID-19. The governor noted that he is working with the legislature to provide civil liability protections for individuals and businesses, and review regulations suspended during the pandemic to cut unnecessary red tape. The listening session also highlighted the importance of broadband access for medicine, education, and business. The governor said this session, Texas lawmakers must remove barriers that slow down and prevent broadband deployment to unserved Texans. Additionally, listening session participants discussed finding ways to reduce permit process delays for Texas businesses. They also discussed the COVID-19 rapid testing program for frontline workers of small businesses, the Texas Enterprise Fund, and how the state of Texas can continue to develop a high-quality workforce. Governor Abbott said, "Despite the challenges our state has faced over the past year, Texas remains the economic engine of America. Texas businesses have gone above and beyond to operate safely, and it is crucial that we continue to foster an environment that allows them to succeed. I look forward to working with the legislature on these important issues, and continuing these conversations with business leaders and workers across the state to build a more prosperous future for every Texan."

***This Week:*** Governor Greg Abbott announced that Nexstar television stations across the state of Texas will carry a live telecast of his 2021 "State of the State" address on Monday, February 1 at 7:00 p.m. During the address, Governor Abbott will update Texans on the state's response to COVID-19, highlight exceptional Texans from across the state, and outline his priorities for the 87<sup>th</sup> Legislature. Governor Abbott said, "We are at a pivotal moment in our state's history, and this televised address is an occasion for every Texan to celebrate our state's exceptionalism and recognize our shared goal for an even better Texas. Despite the challenges that America has endured over the past year, Texas remains a leader for the rest of the nation, and we have a duty to keep it that way. The 87<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session is an opportunity for the legislature and statewide leaders to solve the challenges facing our state on behalf of every Texan. Working together to serve the people of Texas, we will put the Lone Star State on a path toward a healthier, safer, freer, and more prosperous future for all."

### SENATE:

#### **Lt. Governor's Request of the Expert Vaccination Allocation Panel**

On January 21, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick sent a letter to the members of the Expert Vaccination Allocation Panel (EVAP) thanking them for their hard work and making recommendations on

changes to the vaccine distribution plan. The letter said, “As I and the members of the Texas Senate talk to Texans all over the state attempting to obtain vaccinations, it is clear there is a great deal of anxiety, frustration, and confusion. As you know, Texas currently is receiving about 300,000 doses per week, including doses for nursing homes, and it has taken us nearly seven weeks to vaccinate the first million Texans. Health care providers and first responders were rightly designated as the first people to receive the vaccine. Shortly afterward, the 1B group, those over age 65, were added to the list of those eligible to be vaccinated. Those under age 65 with some chronic health conditions were also prioritized to get the vaccines. This combination significantly increased those eligible and exceeds the current supply of the vaccine that we receive from the federal government. With more than 4 million Texans over the age of 65 and millions more with health conditions that put them at a higher risk for COVID-19, simple math makes it clear it will take us several months to vaccinate the current priority population. I believe we need to refine our current vaccination rollout plan with two goals in mind:

1. To make sure we are vaccinating those who are at higher risk, and
2. To give Texans a clear idea as to when they can reasonably expect to be vaccinated.

“Too many Texans are spending long days physically standing in line, calling a phone number repeatedly, and spending hours online, trying in vain to get a vaccination appointment. Demand clearly outstrips supply. While conditions differ across the state, available appointments are often hard to find and they disappear quickly. I believe we must bring more predictability to the process, so Texans can gain a more appropriate expectation of when they will be able to get their vaccination. I urge you to consider creating some subgroups for prioritization within the 1B list so that the more than 4-million-plus Texans and those with chronic conditions don’t all expect to get their vaccination at the same time—something we know is not possible. With over 29 million people in Texas, we know it could be late spring or even summer before everyone of any age who wants a shot can receive one. To provide Texans with clear information and to make sure we are targeting those who need the vaccine most, I ask that you consider adding some refinements to your vaccination rollout plan:

1. Once current vaccination appointments are honored, consider taking two weeks to vaccinate those who are 75 and over—a subset of 1B, the over-65 group. This will cut down on long wait times and begin to address the most vulnerable. There are less than 1.5 million in that group and some of them are already being vaccinated in nursing homes. If we focus on vaccinating that subgroup, many of our most vulnerable will be protected sooner rather than later.
2. Next, we could vaccinate all our teachers and school staff over 65. Keeping our schools open is essential and our teachers are critical to our future. Let’s get those teachers who are most at risk vaccinated. Fewer than 60,000 teachers and school staff are over 65.
3. As we complete these subsets, we can vaccinate other 65-plus Texans by breaking them down into smaller groups. Some simple subgroups could be created based on an odd/even birth year, month, or day. This would help give people an idea of reasonable expectations and reduce wait times and frustration each week.

“Right now, in many cities and counties, when an announcement of available vaccinations is made, website sign-up pages crash and phone calls go unanswered. Additionally, we expect to receive over a million doses a month, but we have more than 4 million people over 65 and millions of others with chronic health conditions on our eligibility list. Texans need to have a better understanding of the time it will take for everyone to be vaccinated in order to reduce lines, confusion, and frustration. I appreciate the work the EVAP is doing as we continue to

meet the critical public health challenges of this pandemic. I look forward to your ideas on how we can refine our protocols and vaccine rollout timelines to better serve Texans.”

***This Week:*** The Senate will not be in session this week. The Senate will reconvene at 3:00 p.m. on Tuesday, February 9.

## **HOUSE:**

The House was in session briefly on Tuesday and Wednesday of this week. The only official action taken was adoption of SCR 5 granting each house of the legislature permission to adjourn for more than three days.

**House District 68** – No candidate received a majority of votes in the January 23, 2021, special election in House District 68 to fill the unexpired term of former Representative (now Senator) Drew Springer (R-Muenster). Therefore, there will be a run-off between Republicans David Spiller, attorney and Jacksboro ISD board member, and Craig Carter of Nocona, owner of Old Boot Company. Spiller came within 560 votes (out of 9,139 total votes) of winning without a run-off. Carter edged out John Berry of Jacksboro by only 57 votes to get the second run-off slot. Here are the results:

- John Berry (R-Jacksboro) – 1,594 votes – 17.44 percent
- Jason Brinkley (R-Gainesville) – 1,489 votes – 16.29 percent
- **Craig Carter** (R-Nocona) – 1,651 votes – 18.07 percent
- **David Spiller** (R-Jacksboro) – 4,010 votes – 43.88 percent
- Charles D. Gregory (D-Childress) – 395 votes – 4.32 percent

***This Week:*** The House will not be in session this week. The House will reconvene at 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, February 9.

## **BUDGET:**

### **Lt. Governor Dan Patrick Comments on Senate Budget**

Lt. Governor Dan Patrick issued a statement about the filing of SB 1, the Texas Senate budget bill, by Senator Jane Nelson (R-Flower Mound) saying, “I want to thank Senate Finance Chair Nelson and the Senate Finance Committee who have worked tirelessly with our office for months. As always, Senator Nelson has done outstanding work. SB 1 reflects the challenges we face this legislative session because of the crippling impact of the coronavirus pandemic on our economy and difficulties encountered by our oil and gas industry. It also reflects the news late in the last quarter that the Texas economy is coming back even stronger than ever. SB 1 reflects our commitment to those conservative budgeting principles that have kept our state resilient and economically sound. SB 1 would appropriate \$251.2 billion in All Funds and \$119.7 billion in General Revenue funds. This is within the increase in Texas population growth times the rate of inflation and represents a 4 percent growth in General Revenue. The 5 percent reduction in spending cuts that I asked state agencies to make is included. This budget also reflects our commitment to:

- Maintaining the same fiscal restraint that has kept our state strong, using population times inflation as our guide;

- Continuing to do all we can to mitigate the pandemic without further damaging the economy;
- Maintaining the historic education funding increases and teacher pay raises established in 2019;
- Continuing our commitment to delivering health care and mental health care to Texans;
- Maintaining our commitment to public safety and border security; and
- Maintaining our commitment to roads and transportation infrastructure.

“This is not the first time Texas has seen difficult economic times. We are committed to maintaining our fiscal integrity using the conservative budget principles that will ensure Texas remains a job-creating engine for the nation and a major player in the global marketplace.”

***This Week:*** No hearings of the Senate Finance Committee will be held this week, but the committee has posted an organizational meeting for Monday, February 8 at 10:00 a.m. and posted meetings every weekday through March 2, 2021 (except Monday, February 15).

### **Property Tax Reform Proposals**

On January 27, Representative Mayes Middleton (R-Wallisville) filed a slate of bills to continue efforts to deliver property tax reform and relief to taxpayers. Representative Middleton said, “Last session, we made great strides in stringently capping property tax growth. These bills will build off that success and deliver additional property tax reform and relief to Texans.” The bills include:

- **HB 1391** would temporarily freeze property taxing entities’ ability to raise taxes if a proposed tax increase fails at the ballot box.
- **HB 1392** would increase the maximum amount of the local option residence homestead exemption from property taxation in Galveston and Chambers counties.
- **HB 1393** would increase the maximum amount of the local option residence homestead exemption from property taxation in Texas.
- **HB 1395** would reform appraisal districts, eliminate business personal property taxes, and set the appraised taxable value of certain property, including single-family residential, small income producing properties, and raw land, at the price paid.

Representative Middleton concluded, “Many of these measures provide local entities and citizens tools to enhance the homestead exemption and place limitations on appraisal value increases. With so many families struggling from the economic shutdowns, it is more important than ever to help people recover by letting them keep more of their own money through property tax reform and relief.”