

FINAL

Legislative Agenda, Arlington Chamber of Commerce

82nd Legislative Session

TRANSPORTATION

A report issued last year indicates that Texas will need \$387 billion over the next 20 years to keep highways and bridges from deteriorating and to keep urban congestion from getting worse. Current funding mechanisms come nowhere close to providing that level of support. Even if money diverted from the highway fund for other state needs were kept in the system, revenue falls well short of meeting the need for the state's projected growth. A flexible, reliable transportation system is essential to the stability and growth of business in North Texas. Many Chamber partners – the Texas Metro Chambers, the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition and Partners in Mobility -- support an aggressive, broad-based agenda for improving highway and mobility funding.

- Indexing the motor fuels fee to the consumer price index and subject it to periodic review
- An increase in the state motor fuels fee, which has been 20 cents a gallon for the last 20 years.
- A constitutional amendment to end diversions of highway fund money to pay for non-transportation related items.
- Renewal of the state's ability to enter into comprehensive development agreements for private-sector funding of selected transportation projects.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Chamber supports full funding, or increased funding, for state economic development-incentive programs that support local economic development, and also expansion of current economic development incentives to expand eligibility for current programs.

EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Texas' education system must accelerate student improvement gains, provide rigorous educational programs and require standards which prepare our students to graduate with the education and skills to enter the high-performance workforce, obtain key certification, or attend post-secondary education without need for remediation. This is an effort best achieved by starting early, so that the entire K-16 effort is built toward producing a

graduate ready for either secondary education or today's increasingly complex business environment. The state should not weaken the accountability system approved in the 81st Legislature.

The chamber recognizes the constraints under which school districts operate. The state funding system does not take sharp, uncontrollable cost increases into account, leaving districts to balance their budgets by cutting instructional areas. Any changes required by the state of school districts should be accompanied by funding to implement those changes if costs are increased as a result of the mandate.

State funding for public schools continues to fall short of needs. If revenue issues preclude the Legislature from addressing these issues this session, we need to note that pressures for further revision and improvement of the funding system will need to be a top priority in 2013.

HIGHER EDUCATION

The University of Texas at Arlington and Tarrant County College are critical components of the city's economy, and critical components of the Chamber's economic development strategy. Adequate funding for higher education is therefore a necessary prerequisite to the growth and success of the city and these institutions. Special consideration of funding needs to advance research and workforce development efforts at these institutions is critical as well.

Acknowledging the state's projected budget shortfall in the upcoming session, we support preserving options for universities to adjust tuition as necessary in light of level or reduced funding from the state general fund.

The State should continue its historical commitment of funding community college group healthcare insurance based on employee eligibility. The critical agreement reached last session between the Legislature, the Governor's office, and community colleges must be preserved in the General Appropriations Act. The certainty this covenant has provided allows community colleges to hire and retain talented and dedicated faculty and staff to serve the growing number of Texans seeking educational opportunities.

HEALTH CARE

A healthy, high quality health care system is important to our business community and our residents. Texas continues to rank #1 in the number of uninsured as our state's health care costs continue to rise at an unsustainable rate.

The impact of new federal laws will not be fully understood for some time. At a minimum, it appears that there may be subsidies available for small businesses that have previously been unable to afford insurance for their employees. As such, we recommend focusing on the following health care policy priorities this legislative session:

- Ensuring adequate Medicaid and CHIP reimbursement for hospital and physician services;
- Ensuring a 12-month eligibility process for Medicaid and CHIP
- Opposing efforts to impose mandatory nurse staffing ratios.
- Protecting reforms to state medical liability laws that provide fairness, predictability and efficiency in the civil justice system.
- Encouraging the establishment of initiatives that support a regional exchange of electronic health information.
- Providing full appropriation of state funding for uncompensated trauma care services;
- Preserving and enhancing the Driver Responsibility Program, which directs fines from traffic violations – including running red lights – to fund trauma care in the state.
- Encouraging programs to increase the number of primary-care providers in Texas, including expansion of graduate medical residency training positions.

AIR QUALITY

The Chamber supports continued funding for state programs that fund air quality improvements, traffic congestion relief and technological investment to reduce pollution. We would carefully review new proposals that further impose costs on business – either fees or regulatory compliance costs – to determine if the costs are worth the benefit.

The Chamber supports full funding for the Low Income Vehicle Repair Assistance, Retrofit, and Accelerated Vehicle Retirement Program (LIRAP). LIRAP reduces emissions from older, high-emitting vehicles by allowing assistance to qualified owners of vehicles who fail the emissions test. Additionally, the Chamber recognizes the Texas Emissions Reduction Plan (TERP) has proven to be a successful incentive program aimed at improving air quality, enhancing public health, and promoting economic prosperity. The Chamber supports programmatic adjustments to this program as necessary.

We support maintaining the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s current level of authority over issuing permits.

WATER

The Chamber supports implementation Texas' statewide water plan, adopted by the Texas Water Development Board in 2006. This plan was prepared by Texas' 16 regional planning groups and represents the state's plan to provide water to all Texans through 2060. We support SB3 from the 80th Legislative Session and the strategies and elements of the statewide water plan.

ENERGY

The Chamber supports enabling statewide utilities to respond quickly and effectively to changing energy needs through rate approaches that are cost-effective and provide a reasonable rate of return; foster economic development; and incentivize energy efficiency, distributed energy generation, new technologies, and modernization of the energy distribution infrastructure.

Specifically, the Chamber supports:

- Initiatives that provide for improved information dissemination on energy efficiency opportunities, and the alignment of policies to incentivize implementation of energy efficiency projects and innovative energy technologies;
- A tiered “non-wind” renewable portfolio standard (RPS) for Texas, of which at least some must include solar;
- Procurement standards as a stimulus for clean energy businesses.

The Chamber recognizes the promotion and expansion of the oil and natural gas industry is critical for statewide economic and employment growth, and further recognizes the special significance of the Barnett Shale to the economy of North Texas, as well as national security. We support:

- Reasonable approaches to measures that address the traditional permitting process for oil or natural gas drilling that will not affect economic development in the State.
- Policies regarding the exploration, production, and transportation of oil or natural gas in Texas that make Texas gas resource development more competitive with other states.
- Measures that promote the expanded use of natural gas in Texas, especially for transportation, recognizing that this will lead to lower costs, new investments and the stimulation of new employment opportunities.

PROPERTY TAX APPRAISAL/LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVENUE CAPS

The Chamber opposes sweeping state mandates that interfere with the ability of local governments to manage their own affairs, including the imposition of artificial caps below the current 10-percent cap on the growth of taxable property values or local-government revenue. These are issues best addressed by local communities.

In addition, the Chamber opposes efforts by the Legislature to impose mandates on local governments to carry out programs traditionally funded by the state as a way to shift costs and balance the state budget.

IMMIGRATION

Immigration issues continue to be a concern for North Texas businesses, foreign governments and academic institutions as they engage talent from around the world to remain competitive in an increasingly global economy. The Chamber has historically supported national employer-based immigration policies and we support immigration reform which will give employers access to a legal workforce to meet legitimate business needs in all sectors of the economy.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

The Chamber will continue to support legislation which promotes meaningful investment, competition, job creation and the development of advanced technologies in their importance to overall economic growth and in close comportment with the principles of free enterprise.

GAMING

Given Texas' projected budget shortfall in the 2011-2013 biennium, there is an increasing likelihood that some form of regulated gambling, including provisions for casinos in Texas' metropolitan areas, will be seriously considered the by the Legislature. The Chamber supports allowing the citizens of Texas to vote in November 2011 on the expansion of gambling in casinos and racetracks, though not specific designation of casino locations as part of a constitutional amendment.