Chamber Remarks

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Monday, December 11, 2000

Thank you Blaine (Gibbs). It’s always good to see my close friend, and your president, Bill Hammond.

Ever since we served together in the 1980’s in the House, I have had a real affection for Bill and the work he does in promoting a vibrant and strong economy in our state.

What exactly is in the water over there in Florida?

Ponce DeLeon once thought it was eternal youth. Others say just a bunch of alligators, and I am even told that a couple of Democrat attorneys think you’ll find hundreds of legal votes for Al Gore there.

It has been quite the rollercoaster ride. In keeping with the words of the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confuscious, we are living in interesting times.

But I believe our democracy will be better for it, and I truly believe George W. Bush will be better for it.

The narrow divide in Congress will force Democrats and Republicans to cast aside their differences and bitter rhetoric to work together to solve the problems of our nation if anything is to get done. And no one is better suited than George W. Bush to unite this country, and get it focused on a positive agenda.

In Texas, it has been the Bush tradition to do what is right regardless of party, regardless of politics. You could say he took the wise words of Sam Houston to heart, who lived by a simple motto: “do right, and risk consequences.”

And I want you to know, when the legal fireworks are over and Governor Bush is finally declared President-elect Bush, I will uphold the bipartisan tradition held sacred by Governor Bush as your 47th governor.

In fact, bipartisanship has been an important part of our success in the senate. I appointed numerous Democrats – individuals who opposed me in the 1998 election – to important chairmanships in the senate.

And while we did not agree on every issue, we did agree to work together. That led to some important successes last session for all Texans, including members of the chamber.

We passed an historic school funding increase of $3.8 billion that included a $3,000 pay raise for every teacher, new funds to end social promotion, and new initiatives to improve literacy.
And we also did something kind of revolutionary when we met our needs as a state, we returned the remainder of the surplus to you in the form of an historic tax cut. That included record property tax relief, assistance to our smallest businesses in the form of a new franchise tax exemption, and new incentives like the investment tax credit and the research and development tax credit.

Under the leadership of Governor Bush, Speaker Laney, my predecessor Bob Bullock, and Democrats and Republicans of both parties, we have built a strong foundation for our future.

My desire is to advance on the progress of the last 6 years, to build on that solid foundation and to make opportunity available to more of our citizens.

Through stronger accountability, higher standards and increased funding, we have not only raised test scores in our public schools, but we have raised the sights of our children. Today in Texas, millions of children can now dare to dream of a tomorrow that is better than what their parents and grandparents experienced.

And yet our work is not done. Learning doesn't stop with a high school diploma. In this digital age, it is more critical than ever that more of our citizens pursue a college degree.

Only one in five Texans have an undergraduate or graduate degree. Simply put, that is not good enough. We must bridge the opportunity gap by eliminating the education gap. And as long as I am in office, that will be my passion.

That's why I formed a special commission to address a number of higher education issues. The commission is examining how we can make a college degree more accessible and more affordable, how we can better integrate technology into the college experience, and how we can meet the rapidly changing workforce needs of the new economy.

As part of our effort to improve access to higher learning, I have proposed creating technology scholarships at our 2-year colleges. Our community, technical and junior colleges are essential in meeting the rapidly changing workforce needs of this state.

I also want to see our universities double the number of engineering degrees conferred over the next five years. High tech businesses around this state are reaching out for new, qualified employees in a very tight job market.

We could use additional web designers and computer programmers trained by local 2-year colleges, and additional engineers to take advantage of the job opportunities that are abundant in the new economy.

In Texas, we have a storied reputation when it comes to producing and recruiting legendary football coaches. I would like to see us develop the same reputation for producing and recruiting Nobel Laureates.

Our state must address another important challenge. With the vibrancy of our economy, and a population growth of nearly 4 million people over the last decade, traffic is jeopardizing the quality of life of too many Texans.

From 1993 to 1998, commercial truck traffic on Texas highways increased 38 percent. In fact, 80 percent of all NAFTA truck traffic crosses Texas highways.

Houston is home to two of the most congested interchanges in America. Dallas was recently cited for having three of the five most dangerous intersections in the nation. And Laredo has seen traffic delays increase by about 50 percent.
And perhaps the worst statistic of all: by 2025, we expect use of Texas highways to increase by 56 percent.

This is a statewide challenge that requires statewide solutions.

The old ways of building roads served us well for several decades, but it is no longer enough. It’s time to do things differently, to consider some new alternatives, and to get traffic moving.

Ten states, including Colorado, Oklahoma and California have authorized the use of GARVEE bonds – bonds backed by guaranteed federal revenues. And numerous other states fund some of their roads with other forms of bonds. Senator Shapiro and Dallas County Judge Lee Jackson have been discussing a general obligation bond proposal that legislators should consider.

I support building more toll roads as long as there is a free alternative. We just saw last month in Laredo the opening of the first privately funded toll road – the Camino Columbia. It utilized the design-build philosophy to finish a 22-mile stretch of road in less than two years.

Design-build, an engineer’s term for streamlining the various steps in road building, will mean roads built sooner and cheaper. Twenty states and the District of Columbia have design-build road projects under way, and it is a tool that Texas legislators should consider to help build roads quicker.

Utah is rebuilding I-15 using this method after determining it was the only possible way the work would get done prior to the 2002 Olympics.

With Texas serving as the gateway to Mexico for business all across the U.S, I believe it is time we received better than 49 cents on the dollar when it comes to discretionary federal funding.

And surely, a Texas president can do better.

A better higher education system means a better workforce. Less traffic means more economic opportunities. Those are two important pieces to the puzzle. I realize they are not the only ones.

Some of you are facing rising premium costs related to workers comp. As some of you know, I was a main player during the special sessions of 1989 in getting the trial lawyers out of the workers compensation system.

Those reforms fixed a badly broken system. But every fix, from time to time, needs some modernization. I would like to see more widespread attention paid to efforts to combat or limit fraud. And while there are no easy answers to the rising cost of care, we must make every effort to contain costs and provide more effective and timely treatment to injured workers so they can return to work sooner.

I also think its time for some class action reform. Class actions can be a fair tool for settling mass disputes, but they seem to be the frivolous litigation tactic du jour. I support allowing the Supreme Court to review class action certification as an appropriate check against frivolous filings.

I’m sure you are all aware that we are entering a redistricting session. Redistricting is that great democratic tradition when elected officials choose their voters, instead of the other way around. Fortunately, though my office will likely change, my district won’t.
But I will do everything in my power to prevail upon the better angels of the members so that the public policy priorities of the people of this state do not become subordinated to the political goals of members of both parties.

Let me close by saying it is a tremendous honor to serve as your Lieutenant Governor. And when Governor Bush is declared the president-elect, it will be my great honor to serve as your governor.

Texas is a tremendous place because of our dynamic people- people who work hard, who try to teach their children the difference between right and right, and who give back to their fellow man.

From the border, to the fifth ward of Houston, from the suburbs of Dallas to the outskirts of a dusty West Texas town: there are no second-rate dreams, no second class citizens.

The Texas of the 21st Century must be a place that invites all and includes all, a land that is enriched by the tremendous asset of diversity, a haven of opportunity for people with big hearts and unlimited promise.

May we all work together to do that which is worthy of generations to come. And may we keep close to our hearts one simple but important idea: Texas matters most.

Thank you, and God bless. I will be happy to take a couple of questions.