Gov. Perry Reflects on Successes of the 81st Legislative Session

Legislative priorities funded to move Texas forward

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

Tuesday, June 02, 2009

Good morning and thank you all for being here today. You all look surprisingly well-rested on the day after Sine Die. Before you leave for the summer, I wanted to take a moment with you to review the significant accomplishments of this session.

I want to start by commending Lt. Gov. Dewhurst and Speaker Straus for their leadership during the session.

You know as well as I do that Texans can be pretty opinionated, and that just about every viewpoint is represented within our 24-million person population, and the 181 people who represent them.

Despite the passionate and sometimes contentious debates, our legislators have passed legislation I requested that will strengthen our economy, improve education and make Texans safer.

We all know that this session has taken place in the context of unprecedented turmoil in the global marketplace, and economic upheaval across our country.

These factors were never far from anyone’s mind as we worked with legislators on a number of key issues, ranging from higher education to private property rights, all under the welcome microscope of public scrutiny.

As the dust settles from the 81st legislative session settles and legislators return to their districts, we can all be proud of the end result: a plan that is good for Texas.

For example, when the new business tax went into effect, we promised to revisit it in the years to come, to make sure it was achieving...
its purpose, without causing unnecessary harm to Texas employers.

In response to passionate feedback from Texas employers, and a detailed assessment of the situation, we have more than tripled the exemption threshold, providing a tax cut to about 40,000 small businesses, that fuel our state’s economic engine.

Legislators also affirmed my emphasis on investing in job creation, with continued funding for the Texas Enterprise Fund, the Texas Emerging Technology Fund, and an updated incentive package for the moving image industry.

In addition, we fought off attempts to raise taxes, loosen restrictions on frivolous lawsuits and increase the regulatory burden borne by Texas employers.

I am pleased that Texans will have the chance to vote on a Constitutional amendment to strengthen property protections, to ensure that government can’t take a person’s property for commercial uses, pushing back on the bad law behind the Kelo Decision.

In short, the 81st legislative session featured tough choices, that will keep our economy moving forward, and it is moving forward, compared to so many other states.

As our state continues to draw new jobs, like the 1,400 San Antonio positions recently announced by Medtronics, Inc, we know it’s essential to keep improving education for the workforce of the future.

I am pleased that legislators renewed funding for the Texas High School Project, which supports math and science initiatives for low-income students through the state’s 32 math and science academies, and high schools on college campuses.

We also increased funding for the nation’s largest teacher merit pay program by more than $50 million, making $394 million available to award teachers who improve student achievement and teach on hard-to-staff campuses and subjects.

On higher education, we increased financial aid for the TEXAS Grant program by $186.4 million, and increased grants for community college students by $10 million: a 40% increase in funding for those essential programs.

At the same time, we made inroads in greater accountability in higher education by mandating transparency for educators, which enables students to make informed choices on the best classes and teachers to advance their education.

Adjustments to the Ten Percent Rule will empower educators to choose from a broader pool of students, allowing them to consider intangibles like leadership, which will keep even more strong students in Texas colleges and universities.

While working to sustain our economic momentum and bolster education, we also funded our efforts to defend our southern border, and a growing focus on transnational gangs. By investing more than $100 million in Texas border security, we will continue plugging the gap left by the federal government’s ongoing failure to adequately police our border.

We have proven the effectiveness of our approach over the years, putting boots on the ground, disrupting and preventing crime along our border.

This continued funding will enhance our efforts to keep up the pressure on the cross-border criminal element.

Although drug-related crime remains the dominant safety concern in the region, our citizens are also another looming
threat: catastrophic storms.

Having seen the suffering of our citizens in the aftermath of storms like Hurricane Rita, Dolly, Gustav and Ike, I am pleased the Legislature was able to settle on a workable version of the Texas Windstorm Insurance Act, to protect policyholders across the state from the next major storm.

By devoting an additional $62 million to the state’s Disaster Contingency Fund, they also gave our Division of Emergency Management the resources they need to act quickly on our citizens’ behalf, when...not if...the next major storm hits Texas.

At the beginning of the session, I called upon legislators to devote their early efforts to protecting some of the most vulnerable Texans in our care...the residents of our state schools.

I was pleased that one of the first bills to make its way out of the Senate addressed the shortcomings in our state school system, ensuring the residents are safer and better cared-for.

Those all represent significant progress for our state.

In my estimation, the 81st Legislative Session will be remembered as a success for the people of Texas.

I’ll grant you that some business was left unfinished yesterday, but that will not impact the business of state agencies, that will continue their daily service to the people of Texas.

I want to ensure our citizens and the employees of these agencies that Texas will continue to build and maintain roads, regulate the insurance industry, and provide essential services, while we work with agency leadership in the coming days to choose the best of our many options.

At the same time, we have more than 1,400 pieces of legislation to evaluate over the next 20 days, so the people’s work continues.

As I wrap this up, let me remind everyone of a few things.

First, Texans woke up this morning with a balanced budget, increased funding for education, and a $9 billion Rainy Day fund that remains untouched. That is not the norm across the country.

Second, we still one of the strongest economies in the nation thanks to policies we have implemented over the past several years. Texas still leads the nation in exports, job creation and Fortune 500 companies and has been the No. 1 relocation destination in the U.S. for the past four years.

Our fiscally-conservative approaches have made Texas strong, and the work done by the legislature in this session will keep those principles in place, positively affecting the lives of everyday Texans.

That is the real story of this session. Now it’s time to keep moving Texas forward.