

SUBJECT: Standards and fee for identity cards allowing bypass of court security

COMMITTEE: County Affairs — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 8 ayes — Ramsay, G. Lewis, B. Brown, Chisum, Farabee, Hilderbran,
Krusee, Swinford

0 nays

1 absent — Salinas

WITNESSES: For — Linda Wilson, Harris County Facilities and Property Management

Against — None

DIGEST: HB 1168 would add Sec. 291.010 to the Local Government Code to allow county commissioners courts to authorize the issuance of identification cards permitting certain people to enter county buildings housing courts without passing through court security systems.

The commissioners court could set a reasonable fee for cards issued to people other than county employees and would be required to adopt standards for issuing the cards to ensure public safety and security. The cards would permit entrance into county, justice, or district courts and county courts at law.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 1168 would help counties recoup the expenses they incur in issuing identification cards that allow certain people to bypass court security systems. The bill also would enable counties to reduce congestion at security checkpoints in courthouses.

County commissioners courts already have the discretion to issue identification cards for bypassing court security systems. Some courthouses allow judges, county employees, grand jurors, and others who must enter and exit courthouses multiple times a day to bypass security systems by showing a badge or identification card. For example, Harris County's frequent visitor

program allows volunteers and other frequent visitors to the courthouse to bypass the security system. HB 1168 would expand these programs and allow commissioners courts to charge a fee to recoup some or all of the cost of issuing identification cards to people other than county employees.

The bill would ensure court safety and security by requiring commissioners courts to adopt standards regarding these identifications cards. The courts could, for example, require background checks and review applications carefully to make sure cards were issued only to those who posed no security risk. If courts deemed the risk too high, they need not issue cards to anyone.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

HB 1168 would give counties a financial incentive to begin or expand programs that allow certain people to bypass court security systems. Allowing people to bypass x-ray machines or metal detectors could result in a less secure building. An identification card can be lost, lent, forged, or obtained under false pretenses, but a metal detector is much harder to fool. An x-ray machine, for example, could prevent a lawyer from unknowingly carrying a hazardous object into a courtroom among boxes of files relevant to the case being tried.

It would be better and fairer for all concerned to exempt no one, even county employees, from the court's security system. Making attorneys wait a short time to go through a security checkpoint is a small price to pay to safeguard the lives of judges and others who work in courthouses.

NOTES:

The companion bill, SB 797 by Ellis, was referred to the Senate Intergovernmental Relations Committee on March 3.