

- SUBJECT:** Creating an interagency work group on rural issues
- COMMITTEE:** Land and Resource Management — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 5 ayes — Mowery, Goolsby, Guillen, Howard, Noriega
- 1 nay — Haggerty
- 3 absent — J. Jones, Hochberg, Pickett
- WITNESSES:** For — None
- Against — None
- On — Robert J. “Sam” Tessen, Office of Rural and Community Affairs
- BACKGROUND:** The 77th Legislature enacted HB 7 by Chisum, creating the Office of Rural Community Affairs (ORCA) to perform various functions for residents of rural areas. ORCA, codified in Government Code, ch. 487, is required, among other things, to:
- develop a rural policy for the state in consultation with local leaders representing all facets of rural community life, academic and industry experts, and state elected and appointed officials with interests in rural communities;
 - work with other state agencies and officials to improve the results and the cost-effectiveness of state programs affecting rural communities through coordination of efforts;
 - monitor developments that have a substantial effect on rural Texas communities, especially actions of state government, and compile an annual report describing and evaluating the condition of rural communities; and
 - perform research to determine the most beneficial and cost-effective ways to improve the welfare of rural communities
- ORCA’s executive committee is its governing body and comprises three members appointed by the governor, three members appointed by the

lieutenant governor, and three members appointed by the House speaker. The committee has authority to hire an executive director.

Sec. 487.054 requires an annual meeting of the following agency heads to discuss rural issues:

- commissioner of agriculture;
- executive director of the Public Utility Commission of Texas;
- director of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service;
- presiding officer of the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund Board;
- executive director of the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs;
- commissioner of health;
- executive administrator of the Texas Water Development Board;
- executive director of the Parks and Wildlife Department;
- commissioner of human services;
- commissioner of higher education;
- comptroller; and
- executive director of the Texas Department of Transportation.

The executive committee must call the annual meeting and set its time and date after consulting with the agency heads involved.

Sec. 487.055 allows ORCA's executive committee to appoint advisory committees, composed of citizens and representatives from state and local government, as necessary to assist the executive committee in performing its duties. A state or local governmental entity must appoint a representative to an advisory committee at the request of the executive committee.

DIGEST:

CSHB 649 would amend sec. 457.054 to authorize the heads of agencies covered by the statute to appoint designees to attend the annual meeting. It would require that the agencies provide information showing the impact each agency has on rural communities for use in developing rural policy and compiling the ORCA's annual report. The bill also would require the annual meeting to occur in Austin.

CSHB 649 would require the following agency heads, or their designees, also to participate in the annual meeting:

- presiding officer of the Texas Aerospace Commission;
- executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality;
- executive director of the Department of Economic Development;
- commissioner of insurance;
- commissioner of mental health and mental retardation;
- commissioner of education;
- commissioner of health and human services;
- executive director of the Texas Workforce Commission
- the executive director of the Texas Historical Commission
- a member of the Railroad Commission
- the executive director of the State Soil and Water Conservation Board;
- the executive director of ORCA; and
- the head of any other agency interested in rural issues.

Also, the bill would create an interagency work group to develop a process to allow agencies to work together on rural community issues, coordinate programs and services of rural communities, and develop regulatory and legislative recommendations that would eliminate duplication of services. It would consist of a representative from each agency required to participate in the annual meeting under sec. 487.054 and would meet at the call of ORCA's executive director.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2003.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

To effectively address economic and quality of life issues affecting small and rural communities across Texas, ORCA must interact with every state agency that affects the welfare of rural communities. By requiring that additional key agencies attend the annual meeting and providing for the creation of an interagency work group, CSHB 649 would facilitate the process of information sharing and contact between ORCA and its partner agencies that is crucial for ORCA to achieve its mission.

The mission and success of ORCA is especially important because of the high incidence of poverty in rural areas. In 1997, the national poverty rate was 15.9

percent in non-metro areas compared to 13.2 percent in metro areas. Rural children also tend to have higher rates of poverty than urban children. Recent and persistent downward pressure on the price of commodities likely will worsen the condition of rural communities in the years ahead.

ORCA has acted responsibly in conducting its annual meetings with the state agencies currently required to attend. Thus far, they have lasted only about one-half day and have yielded important exchanges of information that allow ORCA to progress with its functions. In addition, the work group is necessary to attack more specific projects and technical issues related to the welfare of rural residents that would be inappropriate to address in another setting. Allowing the agency heads to send designees would accomplish the same purpose without requiring them to take time away from their important duties.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 649 would impose another unnecessary requirement on state agencies that would distract them from fulfilling their own core missions. Twelve agencies already must report annually for a meeting with ORCA. The office should plan and develop its relationships with these agency executives before diffusing its focus to involve any additional agencies in annual meetings.

The interagency work group proposed by the bill would not be necessary if ORCA were performing its functions assigned by law. ORCA already has a large staff and authority to create advisory committees, including members of state agencies. Also, ORCA's director should not be able to compel representatives of 24 or more agencies to meet for the work group.

NOTES:

The committee substitute differs from the bill as introduced by authorizing the heads of agencies to appoint representatives to attend the annual meeting. It also would require that the meeting take place in Austin.