



Austin Landline Report January 2019

There was little drama at the opening of the 86th Legislature on Tuesday. Dennis Bonnen of Angleton was elected speaker by a vote of 147-0 and everyone in the House seemed happy and congenial with each other. The only unusual circumstance in the Senate was the absence of Lt. Governor Patrick, who was at the White House at a border security meeting in advance of President Trump's address to the nation.

The congenial atmosphere may change a little, however, once committee assignments and chairmanships are announced in the next week or two by the new Speaker. There are only so many chairmanships and plum committee assignments to go around to those who were early supporters of Speaker Bonnen's candidacy. Of particular note, Speaker Bonnen has hired Robby Cook, a rice farmer and former legislator from coastal South Texas, as his top staff liaison with House members and Oscar Lopez, former staffer for Senator Chuy Hinojosa, to work on transportation and several other issues. (Robby Cook was one of the main sponsors of SB 1, which set up the state water planning system in 1997 that is still in use.)

The early days of the session will feature little floor action while the budget debate begins to take shape. The Comptroller of Public Accounts will deliver the Biennial Revenue Estimate soon. On January 14th, the Legislative Budget Board will deliver spending estimates. Later in January, Governor Abbott will deliver his State of the State address and deliver his budget proposal, at which point he may designate some agenda items as emergencies.

The Constitution prohibits lawmakers from taking a final vote on any bills in the first 60 days of a session, unless the governor designates the legislation as an emergency.

With revenue and spending estimates in hand, the Senate Finance and House Appropriations Committees will begin work on a detailed two-year spending plan, hearing from agency and public witnesses. They will also be working on a plan for supplemental appropriations for the current fiscal year to fund the planned Medicaid shortfall and unanticipated expenditures, such as those related to Hurricane Harvey.

Soon, we hope to see legislation which is now being drafted on issues we will be following, particularly eminent domain. The sooner that legislation can be finalized and filed, the better chance it will receive committee hearings and floor votes in the crunch of April and May.

The top priority for most lawmakers is action on recommendations by the Texas Commission on Public School Finance to reform property taxes and the public education system they fund. The debate could become fierce, because limiting local property taxes requires increased state spending to maintain current funding and reordering programs creates winners and losers among districts and the lawmakers representing them.