



## **Austin Landline Report December 2020**

### **Elections**

The four South Texas state legislators who faced general election challengers were Senators Chuy Hinojosa (McAllen) and Judith Zaffirini (Laredo) and State Representatives Ryan Guillen (Rio Grande City) and Abel Herrero (Robstown). All of these incumbents were re-elected. Overall, the balance of power stayed the same in the House, with Democrats picking up one seat in the Senate in a traditionally Democratic district that stretches from Wilson County to Brewster County. Congressman Vicente Gonzalez (McAllen) prevailed in a surprisingly close re-election contest.

### **State Legislature**

The House and Senate interim reports should be released very soon. In the meantime, it appears that the new House Speaker will be Rep. Dade Phelan (R) of Beaumont. The day after the general election, Phelan released a list of 83 supporters, many of them Democrats, which is a clear majority of the total of 150 members. A number of South Texas representatives were on the list, which should stand them in good stead for committee assignments. They included Representatives J.M. Lozano, Ryan Guillen, Tracy King, Todd Hunter, Oscar Longoria, and Terry Canales. Also, Dustin Burrows, with close STX ties, was on the list.

The general consensus remains that the session will be dominated by budget concerns and the COVID response, with redistricting being delayed for a special session in late summer. In the meantime, Legislators are in a mad dash to raise money before the cut-off deadline of December 13<sup>th</sup>. Ad hoc committees in the House and Senate are meeting to set rules for committee hearings and voting on bills in light of the pandemic.

Early bill filing has begun and Senator Perry wasted no time in filing SB 152, which could have significant impact in regulating groundwater conservation districts (GCDs). One of the bill's provisions would change the word "shall" to "may" in giving the courts flexibility in assigning attorney's fees. Other provisions of SB 152 would allow landowners to petition to change GCD rules and to require any permit applicant to notify nearby landowners of their filing of an application. J.M. Lozano has also filed two bills that would strengthen local prosecutors in cases of human smuggling.