

TRTA/CCART descend on Texas Capitol with Crucial Success

Wednesday, April 8, was literally a red-letter day for Texas retirees with well over a thousand red-shirted TRTA members storming the Texas Capitol from almost every local unit throughout the state. Almost a thousand delegates and alternates had arrived in Austin the previous Monday to begin the annual TRTA Convention at the downtown Marriott. But throughout the sessions and caucuses there was a palpable focus on the impending TRTA Day at the Capitol. By 10am Wednesday hundreds of additional scarlet-clad retirees had arrived by bus, plane and car. Several remarked that there was **“an ocean of red in the galleries of both chambers.”** The effect was dramatic; both House and Senate passed resolutions appreciating Texas retired teachers. Several representatives and senators made homilies communicating personal reflections expressing admiration. Gesturing to the gallery Sen. Taylor mentioned the CCART group and a conspicuously red-outfitted Sen. Sylvia Garcia pointed to her similarly dressed teacher-retiree sister just above. Since 8:30 that morning CCART delegates, Deborah Kidwell, Judy Gordon, Bonnie Melton, Jill Macomber, Lydia Dozler and I had visited in several capitol offices. We started on the ground floor with Sen. Taylor for only a short discussion since he had to get to a Committee meeting at the far end of the extension. Next we made the long walk to the lower level of the extension for the planned visit to Rep. Dennis Paul’s office (E2.814). Once there we were pleasantly surprised with the arrival of five additional CCART members who had just arrived by bus: Joan Schneck, Frank and Sandra Barzilla and Tom and Marie O’Neal. We now had eleven from CCART to survey the Capitol complex.

We divided into two groups to pursue our separate interests. Across the hall from Rep. Paul’s office was Rep. Wayne Faircloth’s office (E2.812) so I briefly spoke to his chief-of-staff and then Jill Macomber and I shot off to Dr. Bonnen office (E2.504) on the other side of the lower extension. It was there at 9:15am that we learned that a Republican caucus with Governor Abbott attending had been called for 9am. Our 9:30am CCART joint photo-op with both Reps, Bonnen and Paul, planned for weeks, had suddenly vaporized. It was time for plan B: a separate meeting outside the House Chamber. By now 10am loomed; everyone had been told to report to the House and Senate galleries to create the “ocean of red” so an urgent trek propelled retirees to the second floor of the pink dome. I stayed to talk to Dr. Bonnen when he returned from the Republican caucus. He suggested that we send a note via a page when we regrouped just outside the House chamber. It worked and somehow from disconnected directions we managed to separately meet with both Dr. Bonnen and Rep. Paul.

With our group divided several legislative offices could be visited. Even though legislators were in active session we not only could sign in with TRTA as an address but talk to attentive staff about the TRS-Care issue. I visited with the staff of Appropriations Chair John Otto [R-Dayton] who has become such a heroic figure for retired teachers by crafting the House budget to include the \$768 million to shore-up TRS-Care. At the office of Pensions Chair Rep. Dan Flynn [R-Van] the clerk of the Pensions Committee provided some detail to the House budget bills (HB1 and HB2). I had met with Chairman Flynn the previous day at the hotel where we shared memories of Van, the town where I grew up and he has lived for several years.

From noon to 1:30pm TRTA hosted an ice cream social at a big tent on the east lawn of the Capitol. Legislators, their staff and TRTA retirees slowly gathered to listen to Tim Lee, Bill Barnes, Ronnie Jung, Sen. Menéndez and other sponsors of our bills. By 1:30pm all of us returned to our bus or car for the long trip back home.

Governor's Pre-K in 5-hour Debate going on as TRTA Lobbyists visit

[TRTA Day at the capitol was not only productively busy for retired teachers but legislators debated and passed several bills in both House and Senate. The following is an account by Morgan Smith in *The Texas Tribune* last Thursday.]

Despite a rocky start — and multiple efforts by Tea Party-backed lawmakers to derail it — key early education legislation endorsed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott overwhelmingly passed the Texas House April 8. An almost five-hour debate ended with a fierce denunciation of conservative interest groups' influence on policymaking from the bill's author, state Rep. Dan Huberty, R-Houston. "We should not to be beholden to a conservative group...or any outside interest group," he said, shortly before the chamber approved House Bill 4 on a vote of **129 to 18**. "We are the House of Representatives, we should make these decisions." The legislation would give about \$130 million in additional funding to school districts that adopt certain curriculum and teacher quality standards in their pre-kindergarten programs, as well as a "parent engagement plan."

[The Senate was busy too. The Senate preliminarily passed a bill that would move the state's public integrity unit from the Travis County district attorney's office to the Texas Rangers.]

Texas House Passes Budget; now we wait for likely Senate debate April 14

based on Tim Lee, Inside Line, 4-1-15

In the early morning hours of April 1, the Texas House passed the budget, also known as House Bill 1, with a record vote of **141 to 5**. The two-year budget, which must still be reconciled with the Senate's version of the budget, is \$209.8 billion. Included in the HB 1 budget is the Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) pension trust fund. This session, the Texas Retired Teachers Association (TRTA) and our members have been working diligently to ensure that the provisions put into place during the 83rd Legislative Session

through Senate Bill 1458 remained in the budget for the coming biennium.

As of April 12, the state contribution to the pension fund of 6.8% remains intact through the House budget. This is great news for the pension fund, as it enables the fund to remain actuarially sound for the foreseeable future.

[The House has passed their version of the budget and hurled it to the Senate. Last week the Senate Finance Committee, where Sen. Larry Taylor is a member, unanimously recommended a modified version of the budget [HB1] but the \$768 million needed to shore up the health care fund for retired teachers remains. The next step will be Senate debate on the amended budget currently planned to begin Tuesday, April 14. In the next several days the main budget (HB1) as well as the supplemental budget (HB2) will be discussed and a vote will be taken. There could be amendments and some lively debate so stay tuned over the next several days to see what happens. In a few weeks a conference to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate bills will be required.]

While all of this is great news, there is still much work to be done to protect benefits for retired educators this session! As mentioned above, the Texas Senate must still pass a budget of its own. Though this will happen soon, an exact date is just guesswork.

Texas public education retirees have received overwhelming support this session from legislators on both sides of the aisle. This support is very much appreciated, but we must remain vigilant and stay in contact with our legislators to let them know how grateful we are and how much their assistance is needed!

After the Senate passes its version of the budget, a conference committee consisting of both Senators and Representatives will be formed to discuss any discrepancies between the two budgets and to finalize a version both houses can agree upon.

Dist. 4 Legislative Chair Jane Eixmann Sends Congratulatory Email

The day after TRTA Day at the Capital I received the following email our District 4 legislative Chairman:

What a terrific day in Austin on Wednesday!
Thank you for your hard work and effort in setting up picture appointments and visits to our legislators in District IV. Flexibility was the key word in this process, as times/locations changed almost daily and even hourly! You were persistent and followed through with great care and reliability. Although we may not have gotten pictures with every one of the legislators, we did impress upon them our concern, diligence, and voice. Every office I visited had "TRTA District IV" and member names filling their books!
Thank you for spreading the word and getting your teams/members organized!
You are appreciated! Jane

TRTA Convention Session Produces Lively Dialogue

There was some intense and buoyant dialogue during two legislative sessions at the 62nd annual TRTA Convention in Austin on April 7th. In the first session our Executive Director Tim Lee, State Legislative Coordinator Bill Barnes and former director of the TRS and now TRTA Retirement Consultant Ronnie Jung discussed the basic problems of Texas teacher retiree legislation. Our TRTA lobbyist Vicki Truitt was missing still working at the legislature. **First priority: keep SB1438 fully in place** which is the law passed in 2013 that made the TRS fund actuarially sound.

Ronnie Jung spoke first with some TRS-Care numbers. He said **that the basic problem with TRS-Care was that there's 10% more people, 10% increased cost with public school payroll growing at 2-3%.** The funding source is the real problem and "there's no silver bullet." He also spoke of a possible **13th check** coming in September being carried by **HB1967** [Keffer] pending in the Pensions Committee and **SB1833** [Menéndez] pending in State Affairs. For this issue the House is enthusiastic the Senate is only "lukewarm" with some

Senators feeling that the legislature "took care of retired teachers last session." **Rep. Dan Flynn** and **Sen. Joan Huffman** are the respective Chairs.

Bill Barnes noted that there is a continuing problem with the teacher retirees who retire several years before Medicare kicks in. As he put it, "That's the most expensive group" since TRS-Care must pick up all of the costs. On a hopeful note he pointed to the House vote for the \$768 million was **148 – 0** and that "Sen. Jane Nelson, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee, introduced **SB1993** to specifically give us the \$768 million." Bill Barnes finally pointed out that one out of four Texans is impacted by TRS and that 280 Texas teacher retirees are 100 or more years of age.

Tim Lee declared that "Supporting funding for TRS-Care should be our basic message" and added that **Appropriations Chairman "John Otto has been driving the train and the Senate did not see it coming. We owe him a big 'thank you'."** The real issue is "who pays the bill." However, "many of the new members are with us and those new members need a 'thank you' as well." Politically "they all want to be a part of helping retired teachers."
On the COLA Tim Lee said that it's a long term obligation and legislators don't like to think beyond the next election. But as he said it Ronnie Jung was shaking his head in disagreement which suggests that the COLA is more of a political than an economic question.

Tim summarized the basic difference between the two houses: **House:** "The market is changing" and two years away we may see this issue very differently. **Senate:** Let's solve the TRS-Care problems now by choosing one of the plans developed by TRS. I got the impression that Tim Lee thinks more study time is needed in order to produce a wise choice. As one of the speakers noted, **"If you choose one system, you need to pre-fund TRS-Care."**

Lee ended with a plea to support our WEP legislation in the U.S. Congress. Kevin Brady's bill is HR711. He encouraged us to send letters to our member of Congress to support HR711 and added that "we must use our power."

Legislative Luncheon Creates Forum for some Legislative Stars

The TRTA Legislative luncheon began with the dramatic video of Chairman Otto's now famous speech on the House floor where he declared that the House will fund 100% of any shortfall in TRS-Care. That afternoon, as prologue to the House of Delegates, a second video proclaimed Governor Abbott's support for retired teachers specifically mentioned the work of Tim Lee, Bill Barnes and Vicki Truitt.

Our panelists for the luncheon included **Appropriations Chair John Otto, Pensions Chair Dan Flynn, TRS Director Brian Guthrie, Appropriations sub-committee Chair on TRS Trent Ashby and fellow member Donna Howard.** CCART president Deborah Kidwell and president-elect Judy Gordon arrived at the luncheon early enough to choose a up-close table where we were surrounded in adjacent tables by Marcy Cann, Ben Barnes, Ronnie Jung and former TRTA president Herbert Norris.

All of the participants expressed enthusiastic support for retired teachers and each added unique remarks.

John Otto was obviously excited about Public Education Chair Jimmie Aycock's just introduced bill to reform education funding calling the bill "a refreshing change." **Brian Guthrie**, who is not allowed to advocate for legislation, reminded us of the basic problem: money coming in vs. money going out. **Trent Ashby** stressed how much this process is "a heavy lift by the legislature" and how retirees need to contact as many of the legislators as possible.

Donna Howard applauded TRTA members:

"Voting is critical and you guys are well known for being engaged.... Speaker Straus is running a House that recognizes that there is a variety of people in Texas.... We need you now to look at the Senate.... TRTA gives us information." **Dan Flynn** added the old maxim "Government is run by the people who show up" and implied that we were doing just that. His final remark: **"TRS is one of the most actuarially sound systems in the world."**

Who has the most say on the Budget?

The Texas Budget starts with the LBB (Legislative Budget Board) who do all the original research and grunt work. But throughout the 140 day session both the House Appropriation Committee and the Senate Finance Committee tweak, twist and modify after listening to many different interested groups both inside and outside government. You can be assured Tim Lee and other TRTA adherents will be giving testimony along with other educational interests such as TSTA, voucher advocates, water and highway enthusiasts and those who just want Texas to reduce spending on everything.

The final product of the House and Senate Committees will likely not agree though each budget will have achieved a firm ok in their respective Houses. By this point we will within a few days of adjournment and Lt. Gov. Patrick and Speaker Straus will carefully select the members of a Conference Committee. This Committee will not start from scratch. They will argue points within the two budget bills passed in each house. In previous sessions the budget conference committee has met behind closed doors announced its decisions at the end of what appeared to be a furtive weekend just in time for the last day or so of the session.

Contact Your Legislators

Sen. Larry Taylor - 512-463-0111
League City - 281-332-0003

Rep. Dennis Paul - 512-463-0734
NASA area 281-488-8900
Dist. 129 area north of Clear Creek

Rep. Greg Bonnen - 512-463-0729
League City - 281-338-0924
Dist. 24 - area south of Clear Creek

Rep. Ed Thompson - 512-463-0707
Pearland - 281-485-6565
Dist. 29 - area of Pearland/Alvin

Rep. Wayne Faircolth - 512-463-0502
Texas City - TBA
Dist. 23 - Bacliff/Texas City