

## Smith first woman to be ordained priest at Grace Episcopal

By Joshua Truksa  
Staff Reporter

Suzanne Gail Smith became the first person to be ordained a priest at Grace Episcopal Church in over 66 years, and the first ever woman to be ordained into the priesthood at Grace Episcopal, on Jan. 13.

Hundreds of parishioners from both Grace Episcopal and Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Angleton, where Smith's husband, Travis Smith, is rector, gathered in the sanctuary to witness Bishop Hector F. Monterroso, the former bishop of Costa Rica and bishop assistant in the Diocese of Texas, present Smith with her declaration of consent, to sign in attestation to her belief in the doctrine of the Episcopal Church, and her golden Bible that signifies her authority to preach.

The Reverend Canon Kathryn Ryan gave the homily, talking about Smith's journey from studying to become a Baptist minister at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University where she met her husband and her years of comforting the dying as a hospice chaplain before Bishop Dena Harrison asked her to become a priest.

"From the course of her



See PRIEST, page 2 Clergy gather around Suzanne Gail Smith to welcome her into the priesthood during her ordination Jan. 13.

(Photo by Joshua Truksa)

## School finance named top priority of Legislature

By David Rupkalvis  
Publisher

As the Texas Legislature gets started in the 2019 session, state leaders promise school finance will finally be addressed in a legitimate manner.

On Tuesday, Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick took the oath of office, and both men promised state lawmakers would look for a bipartisan answer to school finance.

"I want to make this very clear," Abbott said. "We're going to do this session what no one thinks we are capable of achieving. We are going to finally fix school finance in Texas."

In his acceptance speech, Patrick stressed cooperation — between Republicans and Democrats and between the Senate he leads and the State House.

"In Texas we're different," he said. "We work together for the people of Texas because that's what you expect us to do. The elections are over...for right now, and for the next 140 days, you expect us to do the work of the people."

Of the almost 1,600 bills passed in the Senate last session, Patrick said, only 23 were passed strictly on party-line votes.



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, left, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Speaker of the House Dennis Bonnen have agreed the top three priorities in the upcoming legislative session are school finance, property tax reform and increased pay for teachers.

(Courtesy photo)

## Legislature to have additional funding

By David Rupkalvis  
Publisher

When the Texas Legislature gets to work on the budget for the 2020-21 biennium, lawmakers will have an additional 8.1 percent to spend.

Comptroller Glen Hegar gave his funding estimate Monday, the day before the Legislature officially convened. Hegar is estimating lawmakers will have \$119.1

billion to spend in Texas government over two years.

While Hegar said he was convinced more money will be available, he warned lawmakers to be cautious when building the budget.

"Despite this projected revenue growth, the Legislature will again face some difficult choices in balancing the budget," Hegar said. "The most pressing and costly

See FUNDING, page 2

## Cities keeping a close eye on Legislature

State lawmakers eyeing many new mandates for municipalities

By Joshua Truksa  
Staff Reporter

The Brazoria County Cities Association held its first meeting of the year at Stephen F. Austin STEM Academy in Jones Creek, where Texas Municipal League Executive Director Bennett Sandlin gave a presentation explaining the myriad of issues and bills in the current session of the Texas Legislature that may affect the future way in which city governments operate and city elections are held.

The bills that Sandlin mentioned during his presentation include preemptive legislation that prevents cities from enacting ordinances relating to sick leave and lemonade stands. Rep. Ed Thompson has proposed a bill that will prevent cities from using red light cameras. There are also proposed bills that will prohibit cities from using license plate readers for parking enforcement, banning "working animals," regulating monuments on city property, raw milk sales

or rabbit carcasses. Cities will also, under a currently proposed bill, be prohibited from disallowing the possession of six live chickens or less by a resident within city limits.

There are changes that the legislature is considering that will affect municipal revenue, including revenue caps, though the main issue with local property taxes is school funding, Sandlin said.

Sandler included in his presentation that the current budget states that property taxes

"shall" go up by 7 percent a year, allowing the state to reduce state funding by \$800 million, while a budget rider increased school property taxes by \$6.9 billion, Sandlin wrote in his presentation, adding that municipalities have become the "collateral damage" of a property tax crisis caused by the state.

In this legislative session, however, both the state Senate and the state House have

See MANDATES, page 2



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SCHOOL

Continued from page 1

Patrick said the three big issues the Legislature will address this year are property tax reform, education finance reform and increased teacher pay. He was adamant teachers would get more money, pointing to SB3, a bill that would give every teacher in the state a \$5,000 pay raise.

"We're putting teachers first this session," said Patrick. "It's been 20 years since they've had an across the board raise."

The lieutenant governor said the state would pay for increased teacher pay with \$3.7 billion in increased state funding for education.

Gov. Abbott, who was sworn in for his second term, said the state's property tax system was archaic and needed to be addressed.

Abbott said skyrocketing rates are pushing people out of their neighborhoods and keeping young people from purchasing houses.

He listed three policy proposals to address this problem. First is a limit on property tax growth and the second is an end to unfunded mandates on local jurisdictions from the state level. Third, he wants to give citizens more control over the retention of property tax assessors.

"Taxpayers should be given the power to fire their tax appraiser," he said.

Patrick added another goal, one that will likely be popular with senior citizens in the state. Patrick said one of his goals would be a property tax freeze on all state residents 65 and over. Similar measures have been passed in municipalities in the state, but have never been addressed statewide.

Patrick concluded his speech by bringing incoming Speaker Dennis Bonnen to the podium. He said the House and the Senate would work closely together to pass needed legislation this session.

"We are united to work for the people of Texas on three big issues," he said.

On Tuesday, Sen. Jane Nelson, the chair of the Senate Finance Committee, said the proposed Senate budget would include \$8.4 billion in new spending.

"Our commitment to fiscal responsibility is paying major dividends, affording us an opportunity to secure the Texas miracle for generations to come," Nelson said. "This budget makes targeted investments in education, including a well-deserved pay raise for Texas teachers, and continues our work on



Gov. Greg Abbott addresses the crowd after being sworn in for his second term as governor. Abbott said the state will address school finance as well as property tax issues this year. (Courtesy photo)

transportation, mental health and other key priorities."

The Senate's budget proposal includes more funding for public education, including \$3.7 billion

for a \$5,000 across-the-board teacher pay raise, and \$2.4 billion to fund enrollment growth of about 65,000 new students.

It also includes \$2.3 billion to reduce reliance on property taxes and recapture, known more commonly as the "Robin Hood" system of public school

finance.

Finally, it would earmark \$230 million to maintain current premiums and benefits for retired teachers.

FUNDING

Continued from page 1

budget drivers for the upcoming session include a potentially large boost in education spending to reduce the property tax burden and reform school finance."

Hegar's estimate shows \$125 billion in anticipated revenue with \$6.3 billion from oil and natural gas taxes going into the Economic Stabilization Fund and the State Highway Fund.

Sales tax collection will be the No. 1 revenue in the state, accounting for 55 percent of general fund revenues.

Hegar's estimate shows a 9.5 percent increase in sales tax revenue.

The sales tax growth over the last year is the fastest since 2012 and among the fastest growth rates over the last two decades.

Other significant sources of revenue in 2020-21 include:

- motor vehicle-related taxes, including sales, rental and manufactured housing taxes, which are expected to reach \$9.8 billion, up 0.4 percent from 2018-19;

- oil production tax collections, which are projected to generate \$7.4 billion, up 11.1 percent from 2018-19;
- natural gas tax collections, which are expected to raise \$3.3 billion, up 9.6 percent from 2018-19; and
- state franchise tax revenue for all funds, estimated at \$8.2 billion, up 8.0 percent from 2018-19.

While sales tax is expected to remain strong, Hegar said his forecast actually calls for a slowing in the overall economic growth in the state. That is in large part due to low oil prices in a state heavily dependent on oil and natural gas.

"For the 2020-21 biennium, we remain cautiously optimistic, but recognize we're unlikely to see continued revenue growth at the unusually strong rates we've seen in recent months," Hegar said. "Oil prices have dropped sharply since October, financial markets have demonstrated increased volatility, interest rates have been rising and U.S.

trade policy remains uncertain. And as the nation's leading export state, the Texas economy in particular is exposed to potential reductions in international trade. Because of this heightened uncertainty, this revenue estimate is based on a projection of continued, but slowing, expansion of the Texas economy."

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who leads the Texas Senate, said his projections are in line with the comptroller's.

"We are pleased that Comptroller Hegar's \$119.1 billion biennial revenue estimate confirms the Texas economy remains strong despite cyclical fluctuations in our oil and gas industry," Patrick said. "This matches the Senate projections. We face a broad range of fiscal challenges in the 86th Legislative Session and we are committed to property tax reform, increasing teacher pay and school finance reform. We are confident we can accomplish these goals."

MANDATES

Continued from page 1

proposed billions more in state funding for education.

- Let's hope legislators are realizing cities have not been the problem
- Significant school finance reform is the only way to provide meaningful property tax relief," Sandlin wrote in two bullet points.

Other proposed property tax bills include an automatic freeze on the property tax rates of those 65 years of age and older and the complete elimination of property taxes for those over 80.

Another bill that may significantly affect the way local municipalities operate in the future is the extension of the prohibition of unilateral annexation to cities in counties over 500,000 in population. Sandler explained that the

current rule on city annexation prohibits cities located in counties with a population of 500,000 from annexing areas without the residents voting in favor. This does not currently apply to cities in Brazoria County, which as of the 2010 Census had a population of 313,166.

Municipal elections could see a drastic change if bills from last session are reintroduced that would require mayoral and city council candidates to run as Republicans or Democrats. Current bills in the house also aim to eliminate the May date for municipal elections, moving them into down ballot locations in the November general elections.

Cities may have a very lucrative, new revenue source in

the coming year with the ability to impose local sales taxes on online sales made within their territory.

The Supreme Court ruled in South Dakota v. Wayfair last year that online sales could be subjected to taxation.

There are bills in the current legislature that are good for cities, Sandlin presented.

These include bills that prohibit unfunded state mandates, require the state to pay for 50 percent of school funding and allow cities to replace property taxes with a sales tax.

As a side note, Sandlin also mentioned a bill in the state house that will require the University of Texas to play A&M every year to qualify for offering scholarships.

Hawkins Lease Service honored



Texas Mutual Insurance presented Hawkins Lease Service, Inc. of Alvin with a Platinum Safety Partner Award. Only one in 200 out of 17,000 policy holders receive this recognition. Eric Bourquin, vice president of safety services, presented the award to Hawkins whose commitment to safety sets them apart. "We selected your company because you provide the resources necessary to protect employees from workplace hazards reflected in your outstanding safety record. Simply put, it is clear that safety is a core value in your organization." From left, are: Thomas Kirsch, superintendent; Monica Stefanini, safety and compliance manager; and Will Hawkins, vice president of operations. (Courtesy photo)

PRIEST

Continued from page 1

journey at age 9, when she raised her hand to say she loved Jesus and wanted him to come into her heart that led her into the waters of baptism, to become one with Christ and filled with the spirit, through all the wild and amazing journey that has been the life of Suzanne Smith, God has proven true to these promises she heard so early in her life. Through water and fire, even through the flood in her new office, God, Suzanne witnesses to us, has been with her," Ryan said.

"Her ministry, I am confident, will overflow with compassion and invocation and creativity because that's Suzanne and God takes what you bring and uses it for his purposes."

Travis later explained the couple's journey from studying in a Baptist seminary to becoming Episcopal priests.

The couple first walked into an Episcopal church in 2004 for

*“She drove Sunday night from Angleton, stayed two nights in Austin on campus and then drove home on Wednesdays to come and spend half the week with us.”*

Travis Smith  
Suzanne Smith's husband

a friend's confirmation in Mexia.

"We had no idea what Episcopal was and the first step in we knew we were — we were going to be Episcopalian and we were going to be priests," Travis said.

Both Travis and Suzanne studied at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. They decided that only one of them at a time would attend. After Travis became the priest at Holy Comforter in Angleton, Suzanne remained

committed despite a long commute.

"She drove Sunday night from Angleton, stayed two nights in Austin on campus and then drove home on Wednesdays to come and spend half the week with us," Travis said.

Suzanne became deacon-in-charge at Grace Episcopal Church in July 2018. Her new title is The Rev. Suzanne Gail Smith. In 18 months to two years, the congregation can choose to name her as rector of the church.