

Half of Dallas' bills could die as legislative session winds down

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AUSTIN – With less than four weeks left to pass bills at the Capitol, more than half of Dallas' 40 key initiatives are either dead or circling the drain.

Five others don't go nearly as far as city officials had hoped. And of the city's top six efforts, just one appears to be a done deal – a noncontroversial bill to move a state jail out of the Trinity River Corridor.

Dallas lawmakers say there's still time for their top priorities: financing North Texas transportation projects, funding a University of North Texas law school and protecting Dallas' reservoir rights. But with legislative deadlines looming, they'll have to act fast.

"The end of the session is like being on an aircraft carrier with a bunch of planes trying to land at once," said Dallas Republican Rep. Dan Branch, the co-chairman of the local delegation, who carries a list of North Texas priorities in his pocket. "We try to get them down safe without ditching too many."

Branch and his colleagues say their work shouldn't just be judged on the bills they pass. This session, lawmakers played good defense and took a far more regional approach to policymaking – all while managing the wish lists of the city, Dallas County and the Dallas Regional Chamber.

As a result, they say, Dallas lawmakers were more effective than ever in the state's budget-writing process – securing millions of dollars to battle homelessness and fund the city's urban search-and-rescue task force.

"I analyze this like I would a major leaguer's batting average. If you fail 70 percent of the time, you can still get in the All-Star Game," said Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas. "Even passing a fraction of the initiatives on the wish list can be considered a win."

Plum positions

Passing bills wasn't supposed to be an uphill battle for Dallas lawmakers this session. Incoming House Speaker Joe Straus gave plum appointments to several North Texas Republicans – putting Waxahachie Rep. Jim Pitts over the influential budget-writing committee, Branch over the House Higher Education Committee, and Plano Rep. Brian McCall at the helm of Calendars, which controls whether and when a bill comes up for a vote.

In the Senate, Republican John Carona of Dallas chairs the Transportation and Homeland Security Committee, while Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, heads the Education Committee.

But on the top priorities outlined by the mayor and the City Council, Dallas still appears to be coming up short, the result of budget woes and the Legislature's distaste for new fees.

While legislation to allow a UNT law school in Dallas will probably pass, funding for the school is less certain.

"Even just enabling this is a big deal," Branch said. "We haven't passed the goal line, but we're close."

A transportation bill will probably pass, but it's unlikely to include all the financing tools Dallas officials want for regional rail. And an effort to publicly record all real property sales prices – considered important for generating enough property tax revenue for local governments – was dead on arrival.

While Dallas has been successful at deflecting any new rural water bills that could infringe on future reservoirs, an amendment tacked onto the House budget could hinder some future planning. Dallas lawmakers are doing everything they can to kill that measure, and Branch said he thinks they will.

Meanwhile, other Dallas initiatives hardly got off the drawing board, from funding for Fair Park renovations to a UNT pharmacy school. Measures creating a scrap tire program, reducing the use of plastic shopping bags and providing incentives to bury power lines underground haven't gone far.

Big wins

Dallas has also had key successes.

Legislation to strengthen penalties for scrap metal theft and repeat graffiti artists looks likely to pass, as do bills increasing the number of properties eligible for the state land bank and providing incentives for using solar energy. Film-industry incentives have already crossed the governor's desk.

And they expected millions of dollars in the state budget to battle homelessness and fund the city's top-notch urban search-and-rescue team, which has repeatedly been called to statewide natural disasters.

"We've made good progress in the appropriations process," said Larry Casto, the chief lobbyist for the city. "The issues we've sought funding for, we've justified that they're bigger than just the city of Dallas."

DALLAS' LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Where they stand at the Capitol:

SLIDING THROUGH

- Create a state-funded program to make more universities national research centers
- Fund Texas Task Force 2, Dallas' urban search-and-rescue task force
- Get approval to move the Dawson State Jail out of the Trinity River Corridor
- Provide resources for the homeless and mentally ill
- Give incentives for the use of solar panels
- Increase the number of properties eligible for the state land bank
- Provide film-production incentives in Texas
- Strengthen penalties for scrap-metal theft
- Heighten penalties for criminal mischief when it involves public services
- Support human-trafficking legislation
- Allow cities to use the National Crime Information Center database
- Enhance penalties for repeat graffiti offenders
- Mirror federal guidelines for the state gang database
- Support the Texas Commission on Fire Protection

HALF A LOAF

- Establish and fund the University of North Texas law school in Dallas
- Protect Dallas' future water rights
- Establish funding mechanisms for regional rail and street cars
- Enhance enforcement of city laws against clubs, bars and sexually oriented businesses
- Strengthen rules regulating group homes

DEAD OR CLOSE TO IT

- Provide incentives to reduce the use of plastic shopping bags
- Reduce cement kilns' emissions caps
- Establish a pharmacy school in downtown Dallas
- Increase funding for the Texas Housing Trust Fund
- Implement a statewide scrap tire program
- Help cities enforce anti-idling ordinances
- Publicly record real property sales prices
- Fund renovations inside Fair Park
- Provide tax incentives to develop health science complexes
- Heighten penalties for crimes in parks
- Provide penalties for repeat false fire alarms
- Thumbprint or fingerprint offenders at the time of a citation
- Allow criminal trespass offenders to be given a class B misdemeanor
- Make prosecution easier in theft cases
- Heighten penalties for failure to identify oneself to an authority
- Provide incentives for those who bury electric transmission lines
- Form a state air quality committee
- Add a fuel surcharge fee for moving violations
- Allow job order contracting when demolishing buildings and making street repairs
- Let cities bring civil action to enforce towing company ordinances
- Increase penalties for street racing