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Perry predicts special session will be short

BY AMAN BATHEJA

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Gov. Rick Perry announced Thursday that he wants lawmakers back in Austin next week for a special session to rescue several state agencies that will otherwise have to shut down by next year.

Perry said he will not allow any other issues to come up in the short special session, dashing the hopes of the Fort Worth family of wrongfully convicted inmate Timothy Cole that a measure paving the way for his pardon would be on the agenda.

The special session — Perry's eighth — will start Wednesday. The governor has the authority to call the Legislature back for an unlimited number of special session, each lasting up to 30 days, to tackle a specific set of issues.

Speaking to a real estate group in Austin, Perry predicted that the session will be a quick one "to clean up one little bit of legislation that they left hanging."

"I think they'll be in and out in three to four days," he said.

Perry said this month that a special session would be needed because the Senate adjourned without passing a housekeeping measure to allow some state agencies, including the Department of Transportation and the Department of Insurance, to continue operating. The other affected agencies are the Racing Commission, the Office of Public Insurance Counsel and the State Affordable Housing Corp.

Highway bonds

Along with extending those agencies, Perry is allowing the legislature to give the Transportation Department the ability to issue \$2 billion in voter-approved highway bonds. The lack of a bill reconstituting the agency left those funds in jeopardy.

Perry also wants the Legislature to extend the authority of the agency to work with regional mobility authorities such as the North Texas Tollway Authority.

Paul Wageman, the authority's chairman, said Thursday that it is critical for the Transportation Department to regain its power to use financing mechanisms such as the Texas Transportation Revolving Fund.

"We won't get Southwest Parkway going out without TxDOT getting this financing," Wageman said.

Perry is expected to face off against U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison in the Republican primary in March. Hutchison has said she believes that a special session would have likely been avoided if she had been governor.

Public figures and advocacy groups have called on Perry to add pet issues to the special session agenda, including toughening voter identification, expanding health insurance coverage for children, and allowing counties to hold local-option elections to raise taxes or fees for transportation funding.

Exoneree's family upset

The Cole family had hoped that Perry would add legislation important to their peace of mind: a constitutional amendment empowering the governor to grant posthumous pardons to Cole and other wrongfully convicted people. Perry had supported the bill during the regular session and expressed disappointment when it didn't pass.

"We hope that he will have a change of heart and do this for our family," said Cole's brother, Cory Session of Fort Worth. "This is getting a little ridiculous."

Cole, who died in prison in 1999, was exonerated by a Travis County judge this year after DNA testing cleared him of the rape of a Texas Tech student.

Session said a pardon is the only way to completely clear his brother's name. Perry's office has said the governor is unable to grant the pardon unless voters approve the amendment.

"There's a wound that's there and it needs to heal," Session said. "If I have to run for governor myself one day to get Tim's name cleared, then trust me I will."

Another bill, called the Tim Cole Act, to increase state compensation for wrongfully convicted Texans, was signed into law by Perry.

Cole's family had been working with Perry's office to arrange a symbolic bill signing of the act in Fort Worth on Wednesday, Cole's birthday, but that has been postponed because of the special session. Perry hopes to reschedule the bill signing, spokeswoman Katherine Cesinger said.

This report includes material from The Associated Press.

By the numbers

Here's the final tally for the 140-day regular session that ended June 1:

8,074 bills filed

1,726 bills sent to Gov. Rick Perry

1,656 bills signed by Perry

38 bills vetoed

32 bills became law without Perry's signature

1,688 new laws

Source: Telicon

— Anna M. Tinsley

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