

## Exercising Our Right to Vote

*Urge you to make your voices heard by voting on November 3, 2009, on the eleven proposed amendments to the Texas Constitution. Proposition 4 is especially important to San Antonio. Proposition 4 provides additional funding to help seven Texas universities, including UT San Antonio, become top-tier, nationally recognized research institutions.*

Other propositions on the ballot include:

- valuation of a residence homestead for tax purposes (Proposition 2);
- uniform standards for the appraisal of property for tax purposes (Proposition 3);
- the issuance of bonds by the Veterans' Land Board (Proposition 6);
- state funding to improve veterans hospitals in Texas (Proposition 8);
- the right of the public to access public beaches on the Gulf of Mexico (Proposition 9); and
- restrictions on the use of eminent domain by government entities (Proposition 11).



*Speaker Straus talks with Governor Perry on the podium of the House floor.*

*For further information and a complete list of all the proposed constitutional amendments, visit [www.tlc.state.tx.us/pubsconamend/pubsconamend.html](http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/pubsconamend/pubsconamend.html).*



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# Speaker Joe Straus

District 121



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Dear Neighbor,

In January, I was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives by my colleagues, becoming the first member from Bexar County to serve in that role in almost 100 years. As the leader of the Texas House, I focused on building consensus on issues critical to the future of our state, and setting a new tone of respectful leadership that welcomes the ideas of people of both parties.

During the 81st Legislative Session, 7,609 bills were filed resulting in the passage of 1,468 new laws. Key reforms included investing an additional \$264 million in financial aid to make college more affordable for more families, cutting taxes for more than 40,000 small businesses trying to survive the national recession, investing almost \$2 billion more in public school classrooms, and setting aside close to \$9 billion in the state's "Rainy Day Fund" to address the future budgetary challenges. Within this newsletter you will find greater detail on these critical reforms, and a number of other initiatives that will have a direct impact on the constituents of District 121. I hope you find this information helpful.

As your Speaker and Representative, I am committed to ensuring that Texas is the next frontier of innovation and opportunity. We must lead the way in creating jobs and developing the high-tech innovations that will fuel the economy of the 21st century. I always welcome your ideas and input, so please feel free to contact my office anytime. Thank you for allowing me to represent you.

Sincerely,

*Joe Straus*  
Joe Straus

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# Legislative Report

## 81st Legislative Session

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## Promoting Fiscal Responsibility and Strengthening the Economy

*This session, the Legislature overwhelmingly passed a balanced budget without raising taxes. In the future, we must remain a low-tax state with reasonable regulations in order to attract and retain high-quality jobs.*

### The Budget

The state's two year budget cuts overall spending by almost two percent and funds essential services without touching the state's Rainy Day Fund. One-time stimulus funds from the federal government were placed in a separate appropriation so they would not permanently impact the state budget.



Speaker Straus discusses the budget with Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Jim Pitts of Waxahachie, Rep. Pete Gallego of Alpine and Rep. Bill Callegari of Katy.

### Significant achievements in the budget include:

- \$1.9 billion increase in funding for public schools, including a pay raise for teachers;
- \$1.2 billion increase for higher education, and an additional \$264 million in financial aid for college students;
- \$450 million in General Obligation bonds for research to make Texas a leader in finding a cure for cancer; and
- \$2 billion in General Obligation bonds to build new roads.

### Tax Relief for Small Business

The Texas Legislature provided tax relief to approximately 40,000 small businesses. The legislation primarily affects businesses that generate less than \$1 million per year.

### Economic Development

Texas is widely regarded as the best place to do business in America. In San Antonio, our local economy out-performed all of the nation's largest cities through the first quarter of 2009. This session, the 81st Legislature provided more than \$270 million to the Texas Enterprise and Emerging Technology Funds for economic development. These funds will enable Texas to maintain its healthy entrepreneurial climate and continue to attract new jobs from around the world.

### Veterans Tax Relief

In appreciation for their sacrifices, state property taxes were eliminated for fully disabled Texas veterans.

### Property Appraisal Reform

Significant reforms were passed to make the appraisal process fairer and give citizens more opportunity to appeal assessments. In addition, Bexar County will be part of a new three-year pilot program that will allow property owners to appeal Appraisal Review Board decisions for property valued at over \$1 million to the State Office of Administrative Hearings, rather than district court.

## Improving Education

*The Legislature made education a top priority in the 2009 legislative session by increasing funding for public schools and improving the accountability system.*

### Public Education

This session, the Legislature increased funding by \$1.9 billion for public education and gave an \$800 pay raise to Texas teachers through House Bill 3646. The Legislature also reduced the funding gap between rich and poor districts and guaranteed every school district an increase in funding. "Robin Hood" payments were reduced for many districts and completely eliminated for 26 districts. Property-rich mid-sized school districts, such as Alamo Heights ISD, are now treated the same as other similar districts.

Thanks to the efforts of the 81st Legislature, Texas has become the first state to set college readiness as a goal for high school graduation. The new system will recognize individual student achievement and reduce the importance of standardized testing. Schools will also earn distinctions based upon performance in areas of local community importance. Texas' high school program establishes a strong academic core based on a solid foundation of math, science, English language arts and social studies while allowing students and parents the flexibility to choose six electives. Moreover, the legislation offers districts showing improvement relief from punitive sanctions.

### Higher Education

To improve access to higher education, the Legislature approved \$264 million in financial aid to help 35,000 Texas students pay for college.

### UTSA—An Emerging Tier One Institution

Texas currently has only three Tier One universities: The University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University and Rice University. This fall, Texans will vote on an initiative to provide funding on a competitive basis to emerging research institutions, including UT San Antonio, the University of Houston, Texas Tech University, UT Dallas, UT El Paso, UT Arlington and the University of North Texas.



*"UTSA is very proud to be one of seven emerging national research universities. This will not only help UTSA move to the next level, but will help attract additional research infrastructure to our community."*

- Dr. Ricardo Romo, President of UTSA

### Top Ten Percent Rule for UT

San Antonio high school students wishing to attend The University of Texas at Austin will have a better chance to do so thanks to a reformed "top ten percent" rule. Starting in the fall of 2011, The University of Texas at Austin will cap the number of automatic admissions for students who graduate in the top ten percent of their class at 75 percent of its freshman class. Admissions officers will have greater discretion and flexibility in making decisions for the remainder of the class. These changes will ensure that more students from San Antonio's highly competitive high schools can attend UT Austin.

## Standing Up for San Antonio

*As a native of San Antonio, I am proud of all that was achieved during this legislative session to make San Antonio stronger. Here are a few highlights of those accomplishments:*

### Economic Opportunity—Bringing the Jobs of the Future to San Antonio

This session, the Legislature expanded The San Antonio Life Sciences Institute, a joint effort between The University of Texas at San Antonio and The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio (UTHSC-San Antonio). The Institute will provide new opportunities to commercialize research in the biomedical and biotechnology fields.



Speaker Straus at a Haven for Hope event in San Antonio.

### Building Stronger, Healthier Communities

San Antonio is the recipient of a number of initiatives, which will help make our community stronger and healthier. Texas legislators supported Haven for Hope, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of the homeless in the San Antonio-Bexar County area. The 37-acre facility will provide job training and other services for the homeless community.

This fall, the largest all-accessible park in the world will open in San Antonio for those with special needs and their families. The 21-acre "Morgan's Wonderland" will feature an amphitheatre, a stocked lake, a go-cart racetrack, 14 soccer fields and other amenities.

UTHSC-San Antonio is already a leader in studying the impact of diabetes and cardiovascular disease in the Hispanic community. Increased funding to the Barshop Institute for Longevity and Aging Studies will expand research opportunities to examine the links between diabetes, cardiovascular disease and Alzheimer's.

### Transportation—Keeping San Antonio Moving

The Texas Transportation Commission has approved \$60 million in federal Recovery Act funding to construct a new interchange at Loop 1604 at Hwy 281. The new interchange will allow drivers to use a flyover ramp to merge from Loop 1604 East/West onto Hwy 281 South, avoiding a significant bottleneck. Another \$8 million was approved to construct new lanes on Loop 1604 from FM 78 to Graytown Road.