



STATE REPRESENTATIVE  
**BYRON COOK**  
HOUSE DISTRICT 8

The State of Texas  
House of Representatives



2015

CAPITOL OFFICE  
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AUSTIN, TEXAS 78768

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COMMITTEES:  
STATE AFFAIRS, CHAIR  
CALENDARS

Dear Friends,

It is with dedication and respect that I work as a public servant for the citizens of Texas House District 8. Because elected officials have a fiduciary responsibility to employ courage and conviction when making difficult decisions for the people they serve and represent, I strive for that each and every day.

During the past legislative session, I worked in a collaborative effort with my colleagues, on your behalf, to advocate good public policy and pass comprehensive legislation to enhance the quality of life for all Texans.

This session realized the passage of many landmark bills related to important topics for Texans, such as preserving Second Amendment rights, protecting life and strengthening border security. Additionally, the legislature approved important education reforms, addressed our transportation needs and increased government transparency.

Fiscal responsibility was ensured by passing a balanced budget that grows less than two percent per year, along with sweeping tax reforms that allow for nearly \$4 billion in tax relief. This includes a 25 percent reduction in the business margins tax, as well as a \$10,000 increase in homestead exemption.

Serving as chairman of the House Committee on State Affairs continues to be a privilege and an honor, which I take very seriously. The committee addresses vital matters relating to state policy including: immigration, ethics reform, pro-life concerns and regulation of the telecommunication and electric industries. Moreover, legislation protecting our fundamental freedom to worship passed through the committee, ensuring religious organizations and individuals are protected from performing marriage ceremonies that contradict sincerely held beliefs.

This letter outlines just a few of the crucial issues you will read about as you turn the pages of this newsletter highlighting the 84th Regular Legislative Session.

Thank you for the privilege of serving you and this great state. It is with humility and gratitude that I represent and pursue the issues and values that are important to the hard-working citizens of our rural district.

May God bless Texas.

Sincerely,

Byron Cook  
Texas State Representative



ANDERSON ★ FREESTONE ★ HILL ★ NAVARRO



## House Committee on State Affairs

On February 4th, Speaker Joe Straus appointed Rep. Cook as chair of the House Committee on State Affairs for the third consecutive session. The committee is comprised of 13 members and has jurisdiction over issues, which include: matters of state policy, pro-life topics, management of state agencies and the regulation of the electric and telecommunications industries. In the 84th Regular Legislative Session, the committee received 249 bills for consideration and a few key measures that were advanced by the committee and signed by the governor are discussed below.

### ★★ IMMIGRATION ★★

SB 374 requires state agencies to use the federal E-Verify program to electronically confirm that new employees are legally present and authorized to work in the United States. This measure encourages lawful immigration, increases our state's safety and ensures taxpayer dollars are spent only on the paychecks of those legally allowed to work in the country. *SB 374 (Effective September 1, 2015)*

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Recognizing that freedom of religion is one of the most sacred of our rights under the Constitution; Rep. Cook was the House joint sponsor of SB 2065, commonly known as the Pastor Protection Act. The bill protects religious individuals and organizations, including Texas clergy, from performing marriage ceremonies that contradict sincerely held beliefs, safeguarding our fundamental freedom to worship. *SB 2065 (Effective June 11, 2015)*



*Pastor of the Day, Father Ed Monk at the front House podium*

#### HB 3074

**DR. JEFFERY R. PATTERSON,**  
*Executive Director, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops*

“After more than a decade of legislative conflict, Chairman Byron Cook provided the leadership to pass critical pro-life protections for patients and families struggling with end-of-life care decisions. It would be difficult to envision this achievement without Chairman Cook’s guidance.”

#### HB 3994

**DR. JOE POJMAN,**  
*Executive Director, Texas Alliance for Life*

“We are extremely grateful to Chairman Cook for the successful passage of HB 3994 in a strong and constitutional form. This bill has been greatly needed to protect minor girls from the abortion industry for the last 10 years. When it goes into effect, it will have a profoundly positive effect on reducing abortions in Texas.”

#### HB 416

**KYLEEN WRIGHT,**  
*President, Texans for Life Coalition*

“Thanks to the thoughtful leadership and shepherding provided by Chairman Cook, HB 416 is now law, providing a valuable new tool to rescue sex trafficking victims in Texas. Only when working closely with Chairman Cook and his team does one glimpse the magnitude of their efforts, as they work quietly and diligently behind the scenes to pass life-saving legislation.”

### PRO-LIFE LEGISLATION

In 2011, the legislature passed what is commonly referred to as the sonogram bill and then passed additional comprehensive legislation in 2013. Both bills help ensure that a woman’s health and the lives of the unborn are given the utmost protection.

Last session, Rep. Cook and the committee spent countless hours making more successful strides to further protect life by approving and advancing eight pieces of pro-life legislation. After receiving a prevailing vote by the House Committee on State Affairs, the following four bills have been signed into law by the governor:

- **HB 3074** – Previously, the Texas Advance Directives Act lacked clarity allowing artificially administered nutrition, hydration and pain medication to be withdrawn without medical justification. HB 3074 ensures that a patient receives food, water and pain medication unless it is deemed ineffective, against their wishes or actually harmful to the patient by hastening their death. Rep. Cook led the effort to garner a unanimous vote by the committee to pass this historic bill. *(Effective September 1, 2015)*

**OVER 50,000 LIVES SAVED...**  
since the passage of the sonogram bill in 2011, the number of abortions performed has been reduced by over 50,000.  
*Source – Texas Department of State Health Services 2011-2014 (Provisional data)*

- **HB 3994** – Judicial bypass is the process by which a judge may grant minors an exemption from parental consent laws when obtaining an abortion. HB 3994 reforms state laws, making it more difficult to obtain abortions without parental consent. The bill protects life by preventing minors from taking advantage of loopholes that previously existed in the law. *(Effective January 1, 2016)*
- **HB 416** – According to the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, some human traffickers control victims by withholding contraceptives and forced abortions. HB 416 requires special training for abortion facility personnel and certain volunteers who are uniquely positioned to identify and assist possible human trafficking victims. This is the only bill of its kind in the nation. *(Effective June 19, 2015)*
- **HB 3374** – This bill requires that parents be educated with current and fact-based information regarding Down syndrome at the time they receive the diagnosis, which allows for time to prepare for the circumstances — benefiting both children with Down syndrome and the parents of those children. *(Effective September 1, 2015)*

## Session Highlights

### New Laws – Making Texas an Even Greater Place to Live

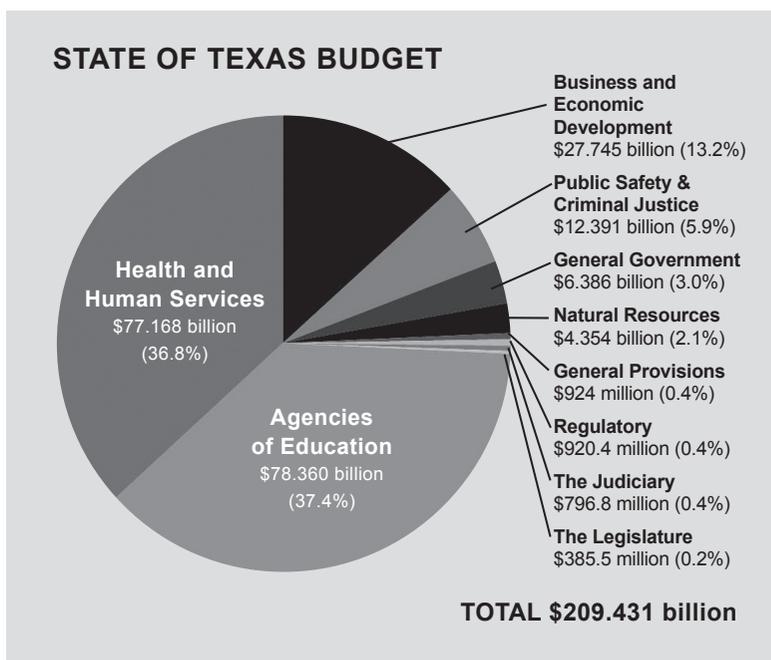
Over 6,400 bills and joint resolutions were filed during the 84th Regular Legislative Session. Below are some notable highlights:

#### ★★ SECURING OUR BORDER ★★

Each year, Washington fails to address immigration issues, so this past session, state lawmakers made border security an enormous priority. With the passage of House Bills 11 and 12, both of which Rep. Cook co-authored, the number of Texas Department of Public Safety troops stationed along the border increased. Moreover, the new laws boost the penalty for human trafficking; create a transnational intelligence center to analyze criminal activity along the border and establishes a Border Prosecution Unit to aid in the prosecution of those participating in transnational criminal activity.

#### RESPONSIBLE BALANCED BUDGET

Once again, lawmakers passed a budget that funds essential services to run the state **without raising taxes**. This budget cycle, a \$209.4 billion balanced and transparent budget that grows less than two percent per year was approved. It stays well beneath the constitutional spending cap and provides additional funding for border security, health and human services, transportation and education.



#### MAKING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE & TRANSPARENT

In the wake of the recent scandal involving the awarding of a no-bid \$110 million contract by a state agency, policymakers passed sweeping reforms — increasing oversight, accountability and transparency of state agency contracting procedures. The legislation, on which Rep. Cook was a House joint sponsor, prohibits state employees from contracting with companies from which they will profit. The new law offers reassurance that citizens can trust their government to procure fair and responsible contracts.

#### IMPROVING EDUCATION

The legislature increased funding for public education and created a grant for school districts to implement a high-quality prekindergarten program. A new, simplified rating system for public schools was initiated, and the role of standardized tests in evaluating academic performance was decreased. The legislature also approved the Governor's University Research Initiative, a new fund designed to attract leading researchers to Texas universities. These measures ensure students will have the opportunity to receive a high quality education at all levels, which means a brighter future for all Texans.

#### FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

Each fiscal year House members are allocated a set amount per month to hire staff and operate their Capitol and district offices. Being mindful of prudently using taxpayer dollars, Rep. Cook has returned over \$420,000 of taxpayer's money to the state, since taking the oath of office in 2003.



*Dr. Diane Frost receiving a Texas flag flown over the Capitol in honor of being named Region 12 Superintendent of the Year, Cosicana ISD*

#### TRANSPORTATION OPERATIONS & INFRASTRUCTURE

Policymakers addressed this emergency item from the governor by ending all gas tax diversions and approving measures that make the Texas Department of Transportation more transparent and accountable. This legislation ensures that taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly on transportation projects to reduce traffic congestion and make our roadways safer.

#### SECOND AMENDMENT PROTECTION

Lawmakers bolstered our Second Amendment rights by passing HB 910, part of which is commonly referred to as “open carry”. The legislation allows individuals who possess a concealed handgun license to carry a holstered handgun openly. *It is important to note that sections of the bill, including “open carry”, are not effective until January 1, 2016.*

## *Additional New Laws in Effect 2015*

### **BOLSTERING LAW ENFORCEMENT & PROTECTING CITIZENS:**

- HB 3791 protects our peace officers through video access of the initial stop and all arresting procedures for intoxication-related offenses. This bill aims to support police and protect citizens by verifying why an arrest was made and charges were filed.
- To further protect citizens, HB 207 allows the act of voyeurism to be punishable by law. Discreetly observing an unknowing individual for personal gratification purposes is now considered a misdemeanor.
- A new form of identification was authorized under HB 2739. Citizens may now use their valid concealed-handgun license as a form of identification to access services, goods and facilities.
- HB 1293 offers protection to victims of stalking. The law allows the victim to use a pseudonym for press releases, judicial proceedings and other records pertaining to the case. This law grants security of the victim's identity and contact information to prevent further stalking.

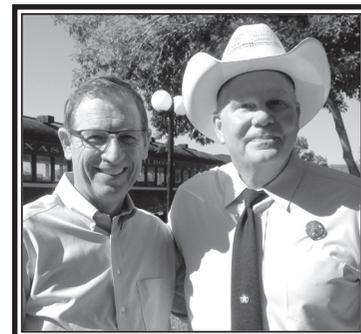
### **SUPPORTING OUR MILITARY**

- The legislature increased the penalty for presenting a false military record. Fraudulently claiming military experience can now be punishable for up to \$4,000 and one year in jail.
- HB 831 aides those who have recently lost their spouses by eliminating the long process widows previously endured to obtain important information regarding the deceased's mortgage. The bill allows widows to acquire the needed information by submitting a request and the necessary documents to the mortgage company.
- To support those who risk their lives for our nation, legislators bolstered the Texas Military Preparedness Commission. The maximum financial allotment was increased significantly to ensure that the military bases in Texas can sufficiently fulfill their duties. The Texas Military Preparedness Commission also was made an independent entity administered by the office of the governor to operate more efficiently.

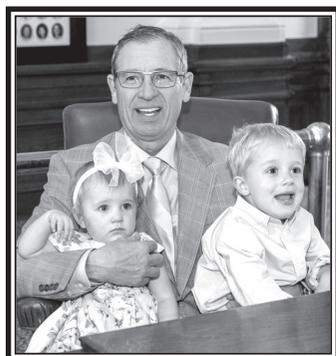
## *Legislation Still in Progress* *Important Work Remaining for the 85th Legislature*

### **PREVENTING TAXPAYER FUNDED ABORTIONS (SB 575)**

The bill prohibits all elective abortions from being covered by the premiums of plans under the Affordable Care Act, thus preventing taxpayer dollars from subsidizing abortions. The House Committee on State Affairs passed this bill but, unfortunately, the legislative clock ran out before the bill made it to the governor's desk. However, as noted by the group **Texas Right to Life**: **"...the bill remains a crucial first step towards applying Pro-life protections to elective abortion coverage in the health insurance market. The bill protects the freedom of Texans to abide by their consciences when they do not wish to fund the abortions of others...."** The legislature should continue to pursue this effort in 2017.



*Spending the afternoon with  
Anderson County Sheriff Greg Taylor*



*Precious time with the grandkids  
on the House floor before their  
Easter egg hunt*

### **TEXTING WHILE DRIVING**

Legislation that prohibits texting while driving passed the House for the third time this past session, but died in the Senate. And, for the third time, Rep. Cook joint authored and championed the proposal to make the state's roadways safer by reducing incidents of distracted driving. Transportation studies show that distracted driving is responsible for one in five vehicle crashes and more than 450 roadway fatalities in Texas in 2013. It is not uncommon that multiple attempts must be made for major legislation to become law. Rep. Cook believes this cause is one worth fighting for to spur cultural change that would eliminate texting while driving. This is similar to the lifestyle change required when lawmakers mandated the wearing of seatbelts, which inarguably has resulted in numerous lives saved.

### **ETHICS REFORM**

Rep. Cook served as the House sponsor for the primary ethics reform bill of the 84th Legislature. As passed by the Senate, the bill was unconstitutional, requiring a person filing for political office to submit a state administered drug test at the person's own expense and releasing the results to the public.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that drug testing political candidates constitutes an impermissible search under the Fourth Amendment. By removing the unconstitutional language, and addressing a number of other weaknesses, House leadership improved the bill. Rep. Cook changed the legislation to strengthen campaign contribution disclosure requirements and guarantee a more transparent and accountable government for Texans. After passing the House version of the legislation with bipartisan support, the bill died when the Senate failed to accept the House changes. Rep. Cook strongly believes that Texas voters have a right to know who is influencing elections. Transparency in elections is a fundamental first step in restoring public confidence in our campaign finance system.

### **IDENTITY THEFT PROTECTION**

Rep. Cook authored a provision, through an appropriation rider to the budget, to allocate research funding for the Center for Identity, housed at The University of Texas at Austin. The center's research on information security has been utilized by many state and federal agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Texas Department of Public Safety and the U.S. Secret Service. Not only is it essential for Texas to have a central repository for its security program, but also, to invest in cybersecurity defense to ensure people and businesses are protected from identity theft. Unfortunately the measure was one of several appropriation riders vetoed by the governor, but this important piece of legislation is worth pursuing in future sessions, as the state must devote resources to protect our citizens from cybersecurity threats.

## Constituents Making a Difference

Some of the best ideas for legislation come from citizens in our community. Your everyday experiences have the potential to make a big difference and result in positive changes for Texas. Below are some constituent ideas that were brought to me and became law during the 84th Legislature.

### SUICIDE PREVENTION

In memory of and dedication to the life of **Jonathan Childers**, a Fairfield High School student and son of **Kevin and Jana Childers**, Rep. Cook authored HB 2186. Known as the Jason Flatt Act, this bill provides suicide prevention training for educators to help them identify warning signs of suicide. Because teachers spend so much time with their students, they are in a unique position to recognize concerning changes in behavior. If this bill helps save even one life, this law will prove invaluable. A special thanks to the **Childers** family for their courage, dedication and hard work that led to the passage of this bill. *HB 2186 (Effective June 19, 2015)*



*Kevin Childers and Pastor Ken Pruitt of Fairfield in Austin working on HB 2186*

#### HB 2186 BROCK GREGG

*Government Relations Director, Association of Texas Professional Educators*

“The Jason Flatt Act was an important priority for educators during the last session, as its passage will literally save students’ lives. I have never worked with a public servant more dedicated to his constituents and the well-being of Texas children as Chairman Cook.”



*Lynn Taylor displays original oil painting of the Corsicana State Home grounds*

### CORSICANA CEMETERY BILL

Rep. Cook served as the House sponsor of SB 2054, which alleviates concerns raised about the long-term preservation of the Corsicana State Home cemetery. The bill turns over the cemetery property from the now closed Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) facility to the State Orphans Home Alumni Association. With beautification plans for the cemetery underway by the association, the transfer has ensured the property is properly maintained despite the closure of TJJD. Thanks to the devotion and commitment of **Lynn Emery Taylor**, President of the State Orphan Home Alumni Association Board, this law came to fruition. *SB 2054 (Effective June 10, 2015)*

### METAL THEFT PREVENTION

To help decrease metal theft, Rep. Cook joint authored HB 2187, which gives law enforcement the tools necessary to more easily curtail this malicious activity. Over the past several years, instances of metal theft have proven to be dangerous and on the rise in House District 8 and throughout the state. Not only do these thefts cost victims thousands of dollars, but many also result in injury or death. HB 2187 eliminates cash transactions at metal recycling centers, frequently used to buy illicit drugs, which helps to remove the incentive to steal. *HB 2187 (Effective September 1, 2015)*



*Sharing Texas history with Itasca 7th graders*



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*Riding the train with Governor Abbott and Todd Staples  
on the historic Texas State Railroad*

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### Useful Contact Information

**Aging and Disability Services,  
Texas Department of (DADS)**

[www.dads.state.tx.us](http://www.dads.state.tx.us)

Consumer Rights and Services: 800-458-9858  
Long-term Care Ombudsman: 800-252-2412

**Agriculture, Texas Department of**

[www.texasagriculture.gov](http://www.texasagriculture.gov)

800-835-5832

**Attorney General, Office of the**

[www.texasattorneygeneral.gov](http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov)

Child Support State Office: 512-460-6000  
Consumer Protection: 800-621-0508

**Comptroller of Public Accounts**

[www.comptroller.texas.gov](http://www.comptroller.texas.gov)

800-252-5555

**Education Agency, Texas**

[tea.texas.gov](http://tea.texas.gov)

512-463-9734

**Environmental Quality,  
Texas Commission on (TCEQ)**

[www.tceq.state.tx.us](http://www.tceq.state.tx.us)

512-239-1000

**Family and Protective Service,  
Texas Department of (DFPS)**

[www.dfps.state.tx.us](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us)

To Report Abuse or Neglect: 800-252-5400  
Office of Consumer Affairs: 800-720-7777

**Health and Human Services Commission  
of Texas (HHSC)**

[www.hhsc.state.tx.us](http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us)

Local Health and Human Services: 2-1-1  
Ombudsman: 877-787-8999

**Insurance, Texas Department of**

[www.tdi.texas.gov](http://www.tdi.texas.gov)

Customer Services: 800-252-3439

**Motor Vehicles, Texas Department of**

[www.txdmv.gov](http://www.txdmv.gov)

Titles and Registrations: 888-368-4689

**Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas**

[tpwd.texas.gov](http://tpwd.texas.gov)

800-792-1112

Operation Game Thief: 800-792-4263

**Public Safety, Texas Department of**

[www.txdps.state.tx.us](http://www.txdps.state.tx.us)

Driver's License: 512-424-2600

Crime Stoppers: 800-252-8477

**Public Utility Counsel, Texas Office of**

[www.opuc.texas.gov](http://www.opuc.texas.gov)

877-839-0363

**Water Development Board, Texas**

[www.twdb.texas.gov](http://www.twdb.texas.gov)

512-463-7847

Agricultural and Rural Ombudsman: 512-463-1711

**Workforce Commission, Texas**

[www.twc.state.tx.us](http://www.twc.state.tx.us)

800-832-2829