

Lawmakers hear North Texans' stimulus ideas

By ANGELA K. BROWN Associated Press Writer © 2009
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ARLINGTON, Texas — Texas needs the federal stimulus money for nursing homes, schools, roads, broadband access and unemployment benefits, people told a state legislative committee Saturday at an all-day public hearing.

But some of the more than 300 people packed into a University of Texas at Arlington meeting room opposed taking the money, saying it showed too much reliance on the government. Some held signs that read, "No Fed Unemploy Stimulus."

"Accepting any of this stimulus money will burden Texas citizens for many generations to come. ... Like the Great Depression years this will only extend the pain of the economic downturn," Dave McElwee of the Tarrant Alliance for Responsible Government said to loud applause and cheers.

Saturday's hearing, the first of several planned across the state by the House Select Committee on Federal Economic Stabilization Funding, came two days after Gov. Rick Perry said he will turn down \$555 million that would expand state unemployment benefits. He said it would increase the tax burden on Texas businesses.

Critics have countered that the state's faltering unemployment insurance fund will likely be in deficit by this fall, triggering an unemployment tax increase on businesses next year to make up for the deficit.

State lawmakers can still try to accept the money through a federal law provision. But they risk gubernatorial veto unless they can get a veto-proof two-thirds majority on a resolution announcing their intentions and legislation for the required expansion of unemployment benefits.

Some residents attended the meeting Saturday because they said they received a telephone message from Gov. Rick Perry, urging them to go and oppose the stimulus package.

"I'm sorry I missed you, but this Saturday you'll have the chance to voice your frustration about the federal stimulus and the heavy cost it's going to place on Texans," Perry said in the automated message. "It'll force Texas to impose higher tax burdens on employers and burden all Texans with bigger, more intrusive government."

Perry's spokesman did not immediately return a call to The Associated Press on Saturday.

The chairman of the committee hosting the meeting, state Rep. Jim Dunnam, D-Waco, said "anything that gets people to come and listen is good."

Becky Moeller, president of the Texas American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, urged lawmakers to use the

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stimulus money to "reform the outdated unemployment system."

it's important that we hear from people what's on their minds."

"This economic crisis didn't start yesterday, and it's hurting every economic class," she said as the audience applauded and whistled.

Loretta Roberts, administrator for Forest Lane Healthcare Center in Dallas and a member of the Texas Health Care Association, said about 50 of the state's 1,000 nursing homes do not have sprinkler systems. She said residents in facilities along the coast were without power for two weeks after Hurricane Ike because they had no generators.

While those are one-time funding options, Roberts said a pressing need is money to care for Medicaid residents — about 60,000 in Texas nursing homes — whose costs have increased the past decade without necessary funding from the state.

"This federal stimulus money must be used for filling the widening gap," Roberts told the committee.

The House Select Committee will relay the public comments to legislative committees that will vote on how to spend the roughly \$17 billion slated for Texas in President Barack Obama's \$787 billion stimulus bill. The committee's next meeting is March 21 in San Antonio.

"It's important that the committee comes out of Austin and around the state," said state Rep. Chris Turner, D-Arlington. "There are so many issues and there's a wide array of interests, and

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