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The Brief: Top Texas News for Dec. 8, 2010

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THE BIG CONVERSATION:

The state budget ax — ever looming, and by now not unfamiliar — has swung again.

In a letter Tuesday, Gov. **Rick Perry**, Lt. Gov. **David Dewhurst** and House Speaker **Joe Straus**, as expected, ordered agencies to trim their budgets again, [this time by an additional 2.5 percent](#), adding to the 5-percent cuts already requested earlier this year.

The additional cuts will amount to about \$500 million, meager savings for a state whose budget shortfall some estimate could top out as high as \$28 billion.

The state's Health and Human Services Commission quickly responded to the letter, saying it would cut reimbursement rates for providers of Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program in February, saving \$42 million. Such cuts, though unsurprising, have activists worrying.

"While we understand state leaders' concern about the challenging budget situation, these new cuts are an ominous development that will jeopardize facilities' ongoing ability to provide quality care to Texas' oldest most vulnerable seniors, and put at risk the key facility jobs that make a key difference in patient outcomes," **Tim Graves**, president of the Texas Health Care Association, said in a statement, according to the [San Antonio Express-News](#).

The order has some wondering what other types of cuts to expect, especially from areas like public education, the largest consumer of state funding. On the same day the state comptroller plans to release a [report giving schools recommendations on budget-cutting](#), the Tribune's **Morgan Smith** has [a report](#) on where those cuts might come from (fewer teachers and bigger classrooms, for one) and what that means for the future of public education in the state.

CULLED:

- The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals [has halted proceedings](#) in the Harris County case testing the constitutionality of the death penalty. The higher court has given both sides 15 days to file briefs and will then decide whether to allow the hearing to continue. One Houston defense lawyer tells the *Houston Chronicle* that the case is likely over: "It's a shame, because a free debate, a well-rounded debate on these issues is certainly overdue, and we may never get that opportunity."



- A day after Texas Attorney General **Greg Abbott** [filed a brief in federal court](#) again defending the state's air-pollution permitting system, the state vs. feds environmental battle heated up again, this time over [natural gas](#) — and North Texas residents' complaints of "flammable and bubbling drinking water coming out of their tap."
- U.S. Rep. **Joe Barton**, R-Arlington, [failed in his long-shot bid](#) to lead the House Energy and Commerce Committee, with the House Republican Steering Committee on Tuesday instead electing Republican **Fred Upton** of Michigan.

"President Obama's decision yesterday to join with Republicans in opposing the largest tax increase in American history was made not because he had a sudden change in political or economic philosophy." — U.S. Sen. **John Cornyn**, in [a fundraising e-mail](#), on GOP midterm gains

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