

# Star-Telegram

## What if Texas has no nursing home for Mama?

Posted Saturday, Feb. 12, 2011

Texas faces its largest budget funding shortfall ever, the Legislature is in session and looking for ways to cut \$27 billion in spending or otherwise balance income with outgo, and who does the state have leading the way to a solution?

Surfers.

As in, a governor and lieutenant governor who are looking to ride waves, not make them.

That defines them as politicians, not leaders.

Gov. Rick Perry justifiably touts the state's recent economic development record, but his challenge today is to help craft a budget that's affordable and yet won't squander that momentum.

His response so far has been to jump on the tea party wave, say Texas needs smaller government and then distract attention to issues of significantly less immediate import: state sovereignty, voter ID, a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution, frivolous lawsuits, sanctuary cities, the regulatory actions of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and federal healthcare legislation.

It's rhetoric that makes him sound like he's actually doing something while he preens on the federal political stage.

Ditto Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who's eying a U.S. Senate seat.

Dewhurst has taken to seconding almost everything Perry says -- and if possible even beating the governor off the starting line with a news release.

The real work-a-day people creating the new state budget are Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, and the members of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance committees those two chair.

But as it stands, Pitts and Ogden also are looking for waves to ride. They've put forth draft budgets with Draconian cuts that meet the generally agreed-upon goal of achieving balance without increasing taxes or using any of the \$9.8 billion rainy-day fund.

Now they're waiting to see whether a swell of public opinion in the next couple of months will carry them forward with these cuts or swamp them into coming up with something better.

There's plenty to protest in the proposed budgets.

Right off the bat, it was easy to see that shorting public school funding by \$9.8 billion wasn't a good idea.

The budgets for education and health and human services together account for 76 percent of general revenue spending. It's clear that they will have to be cut if the \$27 billion shortfall is to be made up, but there have to be smarter ways.

Higher education is slated to take big hits at a time when college enrollment is breaking records.

More than half of the state's higher-education students attend community colleges, where enrollment of more than 735,000 is up 22 percent during the past two years.

The draft budget in the Senate reduces instructional funding by \$193.3 million, down 10.5 percent from the current budget.

If that were all, the community colleges could be told to just take it as their burden to bear in tough times. But what has hit harder is a planned \$124.8 million reduction in funding for employee health benefits and \$77 million less for employee retirement costs.

State colleges and universities also have seen strong enrollment growth -- the 33,000 students now at UT-Arlington represent a 31 percent increase since 2008.

Besides sharp cuts in instructional and other funding, the draft budgets include a 41.5 percent reduction in student financial aid programs.

In many of those programs, there would be no aid left for entering freshmen next fall. How's that going to help the state's economy or provide a ready workforce?

Moving over to health and human services, Texas nursing homes could see a \$1.4 billion reduction in Medicaid patient care funding, a 33 percent cut.

What's going to happen to Mama, who needs skilled nursing home care but has run out of money to pay the full cost?

[Looking for comments?](#)