

The 81st Texas Legislature convenes 2009 session

By **JIM VERTUNO** Associated Press Writer © 2009 The Associated Press

Jan. 13, 2009, 5:30PM

AUSTIN — The 81st Texas Legislature convened Tuesday with \$9 billion less to spend, a new leader in the House and lawmakers facing some tough questions about the economy, education and how to prepare for the next hurricane.

Legislators were warned a day earlier that times could be tough when state Comptroller Susan Combs told them of the cash crunch. While policy debates on myriad issues will likely dominate the next 140 days, the two-year budget is the only bill lawmakers are required to pass before adjourning on June 1.

And for a little while, there was a renewed spirit of bipartisanship.

Rep. Joe Straus, a 49-year-old San Antonio Republican relatively unknown statewide, was elected House Speaker to lead a chamber bitterly divided under Tom Craddick of Midland.

Craddick, who in 2003 became the first Republican speaker since the Civil War era, was forced to abandon a fourth term when his support eroded. Knowing his historic tenure was at an end, Craddick sat next to his wife Nadine and listened as Straus pledged to bring bipartisanship and civility to the House where

Republicans hold a slim 76-74 majority.

"We will create an atmosphere where everyone's voice can and should be heard," Straus said. "A place where we respect each other's points of view, Democrat and Republican, urban and rural, liberal and conservative."

Straus inherits one of the most powerful positions in state government. The speaker sets the agenda in the Texas House and, in terms of political influence, is on par with the governor and lieutenant governor.

While the House was soaking in Straus' glow of goodwill, it took the Senate only a few hours to start picking fights. A GOP proposal to scrap filibuster rules sparked a bitter partisan brawl with Democrats.

Frustrated Republicans complain the so-called two-thirds rule, a Senate tradition requiring a supermajority of senators — 21 of the 31 members — to bring up bills for debate, has been abused by Democrats.

Republicans hold a 19-12 majority in the Senate. The change could come up for a vote as early as Wednesday.

"I think the majority of the people of Texas have spoken," said Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, who is also a conservative radio talk show host. "They want the Republicans to be the majority on the tough decisions."

The flareup put a damper on a day usually dominated by warm greetings, handshakes and

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backslapping among lawmakers.

"Welcome back, I guess," said Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin. "They tell me this is the fun part."

The Legislature, which meets once every two years in regular session, began its 4 1/2-month marathon about noon.

Families and supporters of the 181 House and Senate members jammed the chambers and galleries to watch them take their oaths of office. Long lines snaked through the Capitol corridors as spectators waited patiently to get a seat hours before the session began. Legislators huddled for group photos and exchanged hugs and kisses on the cheek.

"I'm excited. I'm nervous, of course. I feel like the new kid on the first day of school," Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, said shortly before being sworn in for her first term.

Republican Gov. Rick Perry started his statewide political career in the House and presided over the Senate as lieutenant governor. He welcomed the new legislators with a friendly warning.

"Grab hold," Perry said in brief remarks to the Senate. "You're in the for the ride of your life."

The Senate elected Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, president pro tempore, a mostly honorary position but one that occasionally wields power. The president pro tempore takes over the duties of the governor's office when the elected governor and lieutenant governor are out of the state.

Duncan's colleagues praised him as honest and hard working, and maybe even a bit sexy.

"He is rugged," said Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio. "And he doesn't look bad in faded jeans, either."

Sessions typically start at a crawl, picking up speed toward the end as deadlines loom and this year looks to be no different. Neither the House or Senate has much in the way of business scheduled until Straus and Dewhurst appoint House and Senate committees. Some lawmakers will likely travel to Washington, D.C. for President-elect Barack Obama's Jan. 20 inauguration.

When they return, it will be time to tackle the state budget and a very different scenario than two years ago when lawmakers had a \$14.3 billion surplus to play with.

Other major topics on the agenda include transportation, continuing fallout from the damage inflicted by Hurricane Ike, rising college tuition rates and the Top 10 Percent admissions rule, and a proposal to ban smoking in public places statewide.

"The first day of a session is a beautiful thing. It's like a blank canvas," Perry told lawmakers. "Here's hoping we paint a masterpiece together."

Associated Press writers Kelley Shannon, April Castro and Jay Root contributed to this report.

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