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## **Big issues still looming large at Legislature**

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By: Harvey Kronberg

Well, this session of the Texas Legislature is off and running. Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst announced his committee assignments on Friday with little fanfare and even fewer surprises.

Sen. Tommy Williams filled a vacancy as chairman of the Senate Administration Committee, the committee that oversees the business operations of the Senate.

You might remember that Williams is the one who figured out how to undermine the Senate's long-cherished two thirds rule.

Dewhurst also assigned the Senate's only radio talk show host, Dan Patrick, to the Education and Higher Education Committees. This after he served a stint last session on the Health and Human Services Committee.

These three workhorse committees ultimately represent about 80 percent of the money spent in the Texas budget. While Patrick offers traditional conservative critique to his talk show audience, his committee assignments in both last session and this session are at least familiarizing him with the hard decisions and compromises that are what governing is all about.

Over in the Texas House, lawmakers tried something they had not done in seven years. They engaged in an open and extended debate about their rules without fear of punishment. They formalized the method by which a speaker can be removed from the chair and largely undid many of the rules changes imposed during the Craddick years.

But, it was not the end result of the debate that had most members smiling. It was the process. Newly elected Speaker Joe Straus kept his promise in this first serious debate. He did not push the representatives to adopt this rule or that rule. There were no implicit threats of punishment for voting against the desires of the speaker. Straus said at the outset that he supported the will of the House and his performance last week proved it.

There were almost no party line votes. In fact, some chuckled that former Speaker Tom Craddick and his once arch-nemesis, House Democratic Caucus Chair Jim Dunningham voted the same way about 80 percent of the time.

With a new speaker and a new House organization, the Legislature is still a few weeks away from wrestling with the hard issues ahead. Looming large is how to deal with a \$9 billion shortfall and still deliver at least the same educational, public safety and safety net services in our rapidly growing state.



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