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FROM THE OFFICE OF
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County Eye Newsletter

Every two years (biennial sessions) the Texas Legislature meets in Austin for most of the first 5 months of the calendar year. The years the legislature meets allows legislators elected in the previous November of even numbered years to meet the following January to tend to the business of the State of Texas.

Last November Kerr County and other Hill Country counties elected Andrew Murr, former Kimble County judge, to represent this legislative district. Murr replaced long time state representative for our area, Harvey Hilderbran.

Senator Troy Fraser from the Marble Falls area continues to represent Kerr County residents as our state senator.

Each time the legislature meets local government entities pause and follow the thousands of bills introduced in each session because many of them can have a direct impact on budgets for the next two years through what are known as "unfunded mandates."

Unfunded mandates can come in many forms from requiring new training or equipment for law enforcement or new regulations for the jail to new rules for water usage, new voting regulations, student-teacher ratios for schools or a wide variety of other services provided and funded at the local level.

Mandates often require local entities to comply with the new requirement by Sept. 1 of the year the legislature meets. Other changes are mandated as of January 1st of the following year. Often there is limited or no financial help from the state budget to help local entities cover the additional costs of implementation of the mandates.

Major changes that require voters to approve are placed on the November General Election ballot following the end of the legislative session in the form of Constitutional Amendments.

The Texas Constitution is a living, breathing document that changes after each legislative session unlike the federal Constitution that requires a great deal more time and support from a majority of the states for a change to be made.

The Texas Legislature mirrors the U.S. Congress in the steps that must be taken to introduce a bill, successfully getting the bill through the committee process and onto the floor of the House or Senate for a vote of both bodies. Few bills survive the process in the identical wording that it was introduced.

Many bills are introduced on the same topic by several different legislators so compromise is a vital part of the process during the 140 days of a legislative session.

Final votes on almost all major bills are done in the last days of a legislative session, including adopting the state budget for the next two years. Local taxing entities are well into their budget process for the following year before they know for sure which of these possible unfunded mandates are approved.

Planning for the unknown can be one of the biggest challenges facing counties, cities, water districts, emergency service districts and school districts around the state.

Legislators try to keep the taxing entities in their home districts informed of possible mandates that could significantly impact their budgets in the next two years but budget preparers are still left with a bit of uncertainty as they set new tax rates and budgets.

New mandates can significantly impact budgets and tax rates in smaller counties...because they can cause local property tax rates to be adjusted. No matter how careful taxing entities are in their projections, the uncertainty of the impact of the possible new state mandates leads them to be cautious about committing to any new major expenditures in the upcoming budget year.

Kerr County commissioners and other local taxing entities are in the early stages of gathering the information needed from department heads and elected officials to create and propose budgets for the next fiscal year, FY 2015-2016 which begins October 1.

We should all be concerned about what's going on in Austin and how it will impact local budgets and our own pocketbooks. We can follow bills proposed by our two legislators, Andrew Murr and Troy Fraser, and all bills introduced into the current legislative session or to follow the process as they move toward the last day of the session on June 1 go to www.tic.state.tx.us