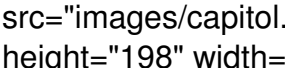


Written by Allan Besselink
Monday, 01 June 2009 14:10

[The State Capitol of Texas at Dusk on Flickr by stuckincustoms](http://www.flickr.com/photos/stuckincustoms/3189889363/ "The State Capitol of Texas at Dusk on Flickr by stuckincustoms")  It's time for sine die in the Texas Legislature. In all honesty, [Sine Die](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adjournment?sine?die "Sine Die") is Latin for "without day", but I digress. And if everything holds according to what I am reading right now, lawmakers will not be called back for a special legislative session this summer. Maybe.

Not that that should really be a problem anyways. Legislators are here for 140 days - every two years. According to my calculations, that would be 24 weeks of five-days-per-work-week like the rest of the world. Yes, in Texas, legislators do their work for 140 days, then disappear from Austin for the remaining 590 days of the two-year period. So now, legislators won't be doing anything again until - 2011. Wow ... a mere 76 weeks away. Now that is vacation!

So if you had a bill or piece of legislation that died in committee, or was left pending ... guess what? You get to wait 590 days ... before you get to start the process all over again.

We're reminded that lawmakers make just [\\$7,200 per year](http://www.laits.utexas.edu/txp?media/html/leg/0205.html "Texas Legislature") for what they do - a "salary" of sorts. That doesn't factor in the campaign contributions (per legislator) and the free food and drink provided by lobbyists during the session (estimated at [\\$1.49 million](http://www.statesman.com/search/content/region/legislature/stories/05/20/0520lobbymeals.html "Capitol dining done on lobbyists' dime") for the legislature). There are definitely some extended "perks" with the job - especially if you'll listen to a gaggle of lobbyists in the process (and hope they don't cash in their "surely you are supporting our cause, aren't you card" in the process).

There was a lot of chatter about lawmakers being glad that the 81st session was coming to an end. Yes, I guess that 140 days of work is pretty hard - especially when you have Easter weekend thrown in for good measure. Oh, and don't forget, it took a little longer to get the ball rolling as they took their sweet time settling on a Speaker of the House. Committees weren't selected until mid-February. Real "discussion" didn't start in earnest until, oh, the end of February.

And then, there is the mad rush to get things passed during the last week or so of the session. Of course, when you pass fewer than one-fourth of the bills filed, you have to wonder exactly what goes on during those 130 or so days preceding the onslaught.

And let's not forget the tea parties and the diatribe of Governor Rick Perry in the midst of all of this. Is it secession, or succession? Does Texas really have the option to secede? Does anyone in their right mind (or even their wrong mind) think that secession would solve anything right now? I can just hear the rhetoric - "Dang Obama ... errrr ummm yep ... taxes ... errrrr governement ... dang it hoss, let's succeed". Either way, it was political fodder - something that happens all-too-often in our world these days.

I learned a lot about Texas politics this session as I had a first-hand view from inside the dome. Physical therapists were in support of two bills that would provide consumers with direct access to physical therapy. I spent two days at the Capitol, speaking to legislative aides about why this bill was good for the consumer, their cost of care, and their access to health care. Neither made it to a public hearing. Both died painful deaths. And based on my research about political campaign contributions by Big Medicine in Texas (and their 26 lobbyists), I was left realizing that perhaps Texas politics is dirty at best, and corrupt at worst. Apparently "doing the right thing" isn't the issue - for political action committees (PACs) or legislators alike.

Much of what I

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learned was disheartening, to say the least. The Texas political scene is filled with lobbyists and a lot of dollars that are used to line legislators' pockets. Whether it's an out-and-out political campaign contribution, or the thousands of dollars spent on "sustenance", either way, it's imposing bias on the legislative system. There is absolutely no way that a legislator can remain unbiased when they are taking thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from special interests and lobbyists. Just spend a moment on the Texas Ethics Commission's website, dig up some facts, and you will be surprised at what you read. </p> <p> My idealism remains, however - because we all must remember that legislators are just that - legislators. Ultimately, they are elected by us - and in order to be elected, they need to "come clean" with the constituents. I must admit, I would like to see every committee vote published, along with the campaign contributions of the lobbyists and political action committees that are affected by each and every House or Senate Bill. It could make for some interesting (albeit obvious) reading. It's not even so much an issue of voting on party lines as it is "voting by PAC". </p> <p> Sad, but true. </p> <p> <a

href="http://www.woai.com/news/local/story/Notable-bills-of-the-2009-Legislature/ux0NzJehZUa?E8kww6IZAQ.csp?rss=68" target="?self" title="Notable bills of the 2009

Legislature">Here is a list of what did and didn't pass this session. There are some mighty fine examples of using the taxpayer's dollars to be found. It's hard to believe what got passed - what didn't - and why. </p> <p> But wait - the story gets better. The House passes a final resolution today and then leaves town. The Senate is left to deal with the last set of issues. Funny thing though - the resolution may not have the <a

href="http://www.statesman.com/blogs/content/shared-gen/blogs/austin/politics/entries/2009/06/01/problem?with?the?house?res.html" target="?self" title="Problem with House

resolution">necessary language. Of course, there are Sine Die parties to attend, and we know the Senate is on a schedule to get to all of them (can't let the House get too far ahead of us now, can we?), so what are the options? How about sine die without approving the House resolution - you know, the one that would keep alive five rather significant state agencies - including the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Department of Insurance! </p> <p> A rather important legislative precedent, I'd say. </p> <p> Hilarious. It's like

watching the front doors on the last day of school - with Alice Cooper singing "School's out ... for ... summer" ... </p> <p> But wait - Speaker Straus just tweeted that "There's a consensus, a growing consensus that it's time for us to leave. I know our constituents feel that way." Yes, perhaps that is true. There are some that would say that Texas is now, once again, safe from it's Legislature. For another 590 days. </p> <p> ♦ </p> Photo credit: stuckincustoms♦