

Chamber Names Priorities for 2005 Legislative Session

As in years past, the Fort Worth Chamber's executive committee has addressed issues of importance to our community as well as Texas in general. With the approach of the 2005 Legislative session, the Chamber now puts forth those issues it finds most pressing as well as its positions on those issues.

Economic Development

The Fort Worth Chamber supports increased funding of the Texas Enterprise Fund, a statewide economic development incentive program created by the 78th Legislature. The Texas Enterprise fund has a successful record of stimulating job creation, encouraging infrastructure development, attracting capital investment and providing for job skills training.

The Chamber supports local control of economic development incentive programs that are financed with local revenue. We support the continued implementation of the Texas Economic Development Act to attract jobs and capital intensive industries to the Fort Worth area and to the state.

The Chamber supports the repeal of Rider 11 which was added to appropriations bill HB 1 and enacted by the 78th Texas Legislature. Repeal of Rider 11 will restore fairness and confidence in the state tax system.

The Chamber supports legislation that would allow Fort Worth to retain a portion of state bed tax revenues to be dedicated to the enhancement of major equine events held at publicly owned facilities in Fort Worth.

Education and Workforce Development

(The Fort Worth Chamber adopted a "Position Statement Concerning State Funding of Public Education in Texas" in February, 2004. The Chamber is continuing to analyze information related to public school funding and state tax code revision and is working with other business organizations to develop a

statewide, business consensus position. The chamber's Task Force on Public Education Funding intends to make a recommendation to the Governmental Affairs Committee regarding an updated or revised position statement on public school funding before the end of the year.)

The Chamber supports increasing excellence funding to assist our area public universities in national competition for engineering and science research funds. We also support the appropriations requests, including special items and tuition revenue bond programs if applicable, of the University of North Texas and UNT Health Science Center at Fort Worth, the University of Texas at Arlington and UTA Fort Worth, and Tarrant County College. The Chamber urges state support for scholarship programs which increase access to public and private higher education opportunities.

The Chamber supports the continuation and enhancement of the Skills Development Fund job training program. The Skills Development Program, administered by the Texas Workforce Commission, supports local economic development and allows employers and Tarrant County College to work in partnership to effectively address local job training needs.

Environmental Quality

The Fort Worth Chamber supports the continued funding and implementation of the Texas Emissions Reduction Plan (TERP) that provides for a state-funded, incentive grant program and local option tools in Fort Worth and other federally designated non-attainment areas to reduce mobile source emissions and achieve compliance with federal air quality standards. We also support additional changes to the statutes and program guidelines that are designed to enhance TERP programs and increase small business participation. The coalition urges the legislature to allow TERP funding to continue beyond 2008 to assist the D/FW Metroplex which must address the new federal 8-hour air quality ozone standard and a new federal requirement that the Metroplex achieve compliance with air quality standards by 2010.

The Chamber urges the legislature to continue funding the Texas Environmental Research Consortium and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to perform scientific research in support of the development of air quality attainment plans under the new 8-hour air quality standard.

The Chamber supports statutory revisions allowing the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to exercise greater flexibility in the fair evaluation of the compliance histories of businesses permitted and regulated by the agency.

Current laws and regulations relating to compliance history rating and classification place an unfair burden on small businesses and create a disincentive to business growth and investment.

Healthcare

The Fort Worth Chamber urges the legislature to restore funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid programs to a level which increases the state's receipt of federal matching dollars and ensures that uninsured children in low-income, working families receive appropriate and needed care. Adequate state funding will ensure that healthcare costs are not shifted to overburdened local governments and healthcare delivery providers.

Transportation

The Fort Worth Chamber supports legislation that will enable the Fort Worth and Tarrant County area and the D/FW Metroplex to address essential transportation projects including additional roadway capacity, the development of a regional commuter rail system and improvements in freight mobility.

We urge the legislature to preserve all transportation resources and revenues and the authority and flexibility achieved with HB 3588 and other transportation bills enacted by the 78th Texas legislature. The Chamber also supports legislative action that would allow the motor fuels tax to adjust according to economic trends by tying the rate to an appropriate economic index. We support allowing the Metroplex region to enact a voter-approved, local option transportation tax. And

we urge the legislature to reverse current diversions of transportation revenues to non-transportation uses.

The Chamber supports legislation to allow Metroplex counties to collectively address projected increases in population, employment and traffic congestion with the creation of a regional commuter rail authority, achieving a seamless system of rail transit services throughout the region, with funding provided by additional sales tax capacity, approved by local option election.

Workers' Compensation Reform

The Fort Worth Chamber supports state policies that will improve the workers' compensation system in Texas by reducing the cost of workers' compensation medical care, improving the quality of care for workers and returning them to work in a timely manner, and allowing employers to be directly involved in the immediate treatment and follow-up medical care of injured employees. We support legislative and regulatory policies that will make workers' compensation coverage available to more Texas employers at affordable rates in a competitive insurance market. The Chamber believes any legislative and regulatory action related to worker's compensation should allow for healthcare provider networks that provide the best medical care for injured workers from appropriately credentialed providers and facilities. The initial treatment of injured employees should be performed by physicians with sufficiently broad education and training to direct care for the full range of workplace injuries. We also support the benchmarking of networks' return to work and treatment outcomes.

In future issues of the *Chamberletter*, we will provide updates and the status of these Chamber-supported initiatives. For more information, contact Tim Keleher at 817/336-2491, ext. 264.