

MEMO

Date: October 1, 2020
To: Interested Parties
From: Greater Houston Partnership Public Policy Department
Subject: Interim Comments on Key Legislative Priorities for the Partnership

Overview

Although COVID-19 resulted in the suspension of all state legislative committee hearings, the Texas House of Representatives adapted by requesting comments on the various topics they are studying this interim. The Partnership weighed in on nine of these issue areas important to the continued economic growth and competitiveness of the Houston region. These comments are released as public documents and are a necessary step in the Partnership being seen as a leader on these issues. The policy team will build on these comments in our discussions with legislators and stakeholders as we move towards and into the next legislative session.

If you have questions or comments about Partnership positions on these or other issues, please reach out to Lindsay Munoz, our Vice President of Public Policy and Advocacy at lmunoz@houston.org.

The Digital Divide

COVID-19 exposed the gaps in broadband access across Texas, particularly as they affect students and workers. We submitted comments to the [House Public Education Committee](#) calling on the state to take a holistic view of broadband access, including but not limited to connectivity in public education. We further included data on the economic and social costs of failing to address this issue. This is the first time the Partnership has submitted public comments to the Legislature on the topic of digital divide, and we look forward to expanding our leadership role on this policy issue during the next legislative session.

Workforce

The Partnership submitted letters to two separate committees regarding workforce development and Texas' 60x30 college graduation plan, which aims for 60% of Texans having post-secondary degrees by 2030.

- To the [House Higher Education Committee](#), we proposed increasing investment and efforts in ongoing pilot programs to re-engage with adults who have dropped out of college and help them finish their degrees, such as the GradTX 2.0 program. Raising the percentage of adults who go back to school to complete their degrees is necessary if Texas is to achieve its 60x30 goals.
- Comments were also sent to the [House Committee on International Relations & Economic Development](#), highlighting the need for the business community to have a seat at the table as public and higher education institutions are discussing curriculums and degree programs. The letter built upon the work done last legislative session with the passage of House Bill 3511, which sought to align our workforce pipeline with industry needs.

Flood Resiliency

Here again, the Partnership submitted comments to multiple committees, as part of our ongoing commitment to improving state and local flood resiliency.

- One comment went to the [House Appropriations Subcommittee on Infrastructure, Resiliency & Investments](#), which is examining the funding streams and methods for flood resiliency projects. In these comments, we encouraged the state to maximize matching funds to draw down even greater federal dollars for resiliency projects, including coastal protections.
- To the [House Committee on Natural Resources](#), we offered opinions on ways to improve the equitable prioritization of grant and loan money for resiliency projects. The Partnership advocated for increased state assistance for smaller communities, many of which cannot afford the cost of providing local matching funds for the drawdown of federal dollars for large projects. Our comments also tie in with our work on equity and ensuring that everyone benefits from resiliency projects.

Higher Education

A policy area of growing concern is the historic state funding prioritization of just a few university systems, while other institutions serving larger lower-income student populations do not have nearly as much support on a per-capita student basis. Houston has multiple higher education institutions in the latter category. The Partnership submitted comments to the [House Appropriations Article III Subcommittee](#), which handles funding of Texas' public higher education institutions, as part of our increasing long-term efforts to advocate for a more equitable higher education system in our state.

Health Care

Many of the health care institutions in the Houston region will soon face negative financial repercussions from the decline and eventual expiration of a large federal waiver program over the next two years. The Partnership was one of just a very few non-health care institutions to submit comments to the [House Appropriations Article II Subcommittee](#), which handles funding of Texas' health care programs, on the consequences of this program drawdown. We will be working with the committee, our region's health care institutions and other state leaders to negotiate a continuation of the waiver program with the federal government.

Transportation

The Partnership submitted comments to the [House Transportation Committee](#) on the need to protect our current transportation funding and to protect our various project funding options, including toll roads. With our region estimated to be home to over 11 million people by 2040, our transportation infrastructure needs will only continue to grow. The Partnership, along with many state and regional transportation allies, remain concerned about statewide attempts to limit transportation project funding options like toll roads. We recognize that while tolls, public private partnerships or other financing methods may not be appropriate for all projects, there are many projects which would never have come to fruition without such options. In what will undoubtedly be a tight budgetary session, we will lack the additional dollars needed for state transportation projects and must protect all funding options.

Eminent Domain

The Partnership submitted comments to the [House Committee on Land & Resource Management](#) in support of our energy partners regarding the eminent domain process and Texas' Landowners Bill of Rights. During the 2019 legislative session, the Partnership worked with member companies on this issue in support of a resolution which would help Texas' economic growth, while offering support for a fair and equitable process for businesses and landowners. Negotiations between landowners and businesses are continuing. We are hopeful all sides will reach a satisfactory agreement during the upcoming legislative session.