

Valley lawmakers recall session successes, failures

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MCALLEN — State lawmakers from the Rio Grande Valley lamented on Wednesday the Legislature's failed attempts to fund public education, even as they claimed victory for killing a "bad" education spending proposal.

The general assembly's last regular session — and two subsequent special sessions — ended with no agreement on how to finance public schools.

"Unfortunately, in the end there was never a proposal that would have improved the learning environment for our kids statewide ... but particularly no proposal that would have benefited our kids, especially, here in the Rio Grande Valley," Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, said during the 79th Legislative Wrap-up Luncheon at the McAllen Chamber

of Commerce.

Lucio joined fellow Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, and Reps. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg, Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen and Armando "Mando" Martinez, D-Weslaco, in reviewing the successes and failures of the 79th session and offering glimpses of what lies ahead.

"The good news is that we were able to put together a \$118.2 billion budget without raising taxes," Lucio said. "The bad news is that the Legislature decided to wield the budget ax and produce a budget that, unfortunately, I couldn't support and most of (my fellow delegation members) could not either."

Hinojosa touted a successful



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measure intended to improve fairness in the courts by providing for the random assignment of civil cases at the Hidalgo County Courthouse to judges. And he recalled being disappointed when the Rio Grande Valley Health Services District gave up \$6 million to San Antonio.

He said the Valley delegation ended up winning back \$3 million and put a line item in the appropriations bill to fund a drug treatment center here in the Valley. The nearest such facility is in Corpus Christi, where the waiting period for treatment is as long as six months, he said.

The senator also highlighted a measure intended to eliminate rogue drug task forces by



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enhancing oversight and accountability.

Peña said the "real problem" for the Valley is the tax structure and highlighted the challenge of making sure the Legislature doesn't foist an unfair tax burden on border communities.

"We're probably going to have another session where we're going to fight over who's going to get taxed and who's not going to get taxed," he said. "I've only been there two terms, but my best guess is we're going to go to a statewide property tax of some sort. But along that path, there's going to be winners and losers, and so we need to stay involved."

Lucio said he supports tax reform but only when it cre-

ates a level playing field for taxpayers.

"I don't really like raising the sales tax," he said. "To me, that's pretty regressive. We need to find better ways of raising the funds necessary, and not just shifting the method of taxation to get nowhere."

Payroll taxes also aren't the answer, Gonzales said, recalling a recent tax proposal she opposed. She said employers who described themselves as labor intensive told her a payroll tax would hurt their ability to provide benefits such as health insurance and retirement contributions to their employees.

For successes, Gonzales touted restoring services to the Children's Health Insurance Program, increasing Medicaid



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funding by almost \$5 billion, streamlining the workers compensation system and adding 2,500 workers to Child Protective Services. She also highlighted the establishment of a life-without-parole sentence option, giving Hidalgo County about \$1 million for

adult probation, increasing daily jury pay from \$6 to \$40, creating a new county court, and passing the Emerging Technology Fund.

"Despite the fact that the education bill didn't pass, which was good for us, and the tax bill didn't pass," Gonzales said, "we were able to get a lot done."

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