

Lawmakers say 80th legislature was a success

EDINBURG, July 19 -

At a legislative update and luncheon Thursday, the *Guardian* asked Edinburg area lawmakers to gauge their success rate in the aftermath of the 80th Legislative Session.

The event was hosted at the Echo Hotel by Edinburg Chamber of Commerce. Afterwards, the legislators gave their take on how the session went.

“Out of 10 we did a 12,” said Rep. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg. “We got

everything we wanted and more in terms of projects, funding, and our share of the budget.”

Peña highlighted more than \$80 million in budget items for South Texas including a 13 percent increase in funding for the University of Texas-Pan American.

Included in the budget are \$3 million for a substance abuse treatment facility in Hidalgo County, Peña listed, in his Capitol Update report, plus \$50 million for regional DPS facilities in Starr and Hidalgo counties, \$10 million to upgrade South Texas Hospital, \$6 million for public water improvements, \$4.5 million for local parks and nature centers, and \$1.6 million to the Texas Ag Experiment Station for plant disease research.

“We had a very conservative budget,” Peña said. “The difference is we got more than we have ever got before, so we did very, very, very well.”

For Peña, other notable achievements included a bi-partisan effort to restore funding to the Children’s Health Insurance Program. More than 127,000 children will be added to the state’s low cost health insurance plan as result of HB 109, which Peña co-authored.

Asked if he and other Valley legislators could improve upon the results of this past legislative session, Peña said they could at least be equaled.

“That’s the part that is hard,” Peña said. “When you hit a Grand Slam, how do you do better? I believe there are more Grand Slams ahead of us.”

By Joey Gomez



Edinburg Chamber of Commerce staged a Legislative Update Luncheon at the Echo Hotel Thursday. The chamber heard from Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, and state Reps. Veronica Gonzales and Aaron Peña. (Photo: RGG/Joey Gomez)

Peña said he would not forget the session in a hurry.

“This was a session I will never forget not only because of its turmoil because even with our adversity or actually because of our adversity we succeeded. We’re like a mesquite tree that thrives in the desert despite a very adverse environment,” Peña said.

State Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, gave the session a more modest grade. She stressed the need for more input from Valley constituents, and for starting work in conjunction with other lawmakers earlier. “Plan your work, and work your plan,” Gonzales said.

“I would say the level of success was an eight (out of 10), but we always have more work to do,” Gonzales said. “We have long been under-funded in the Rio Grande Valley and forgotten. Now, we’re finally starting to make a mark so I think in the next few sessions hopefully we see greater things come to the Valley.”

One of Gonzales’s bills was HB 271, which requires homeowners to disclose when selling a property whether their home has been used for the manufacture of methamphetamine. Another piece of legislation Gonzales said she was proud of was SB 74, which creates an address confidentiality program through the Attorney General’s Office for victims of family violence. Gonzales sponsored the bill.

Additionally, Gonzales mentioned HB 14 which authorizes \$3 billion in funds to be issued over the course of ten years to fund cancer research, in the hope of finding a cure for a disease that affects 85,000 Texans.

State Sen. Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa, D-McAllen, ranked the 80th Legislature somewhere between the rankings offered by Peña and Gonzales.

“I would say we scored a 10,” Hinojosa told the *Guardian*. “The delegation worked closely together, and we had three border senators on the Finance Committee. We got the majority of our priority projects funded in terms of public safety, education, and trying to help our young people who have a substance abuse problem.”

Hinojosa also referenced a big push by lawmakers for increased border security, citing an appropriation of more than \$100 million to protect the border from drug cartels.

“We are one of the fastest growing areas in the state, and our needs continue to change, and we will be willing to address those as we grow,” Hinojosa said. “There is always room for improvement. We live in a dynamic society that is always changing. It’s never static so that means next session we will be prepared to address the needs as the area continues to grow.”

Among the most disappointing aspects of the session, Hinojosa told the *Guardian*, was Gov. Rick Perry’s veto of funds that would have gone towards the payment of health insurance for community college employees. Hinojosa said that as a result of the veto, South Texas College would lose more than \$2 million.

“It was a low point, because there was no reason for the Governor to veto the money statewide, \$152 million statewide. It really hurt education, in community college systems across Texas,” Hinojosa said.