

Monday Wash: Adequate, equity, fairness

By **Odie Arambula**

Recent developments in Spain, Mexico, Afghanistan, Iraq and other foreign lands have not deterred attention from Austin on an issue that continues to hit right at home taxes.

The common denominator boils down to a system of financing public schools, a system best known to everyone as Robin Hood that key segments of Austin leadership want to eliminate.

THE RHETORIC OUT of Austin seems to have Robin Hood trying to find room for consensus among the messages of adequacy, equity and fairness. Texas Gov. Rick Perry has proposed another special session, this time tentatively in April, to deal with school public funding. The governor really wants to talk taxes, but he first wants consensus on the plan.

Consensus we don't have and judging from what is heard around the state, and in Austin, even the state leadership lacks consensus on a plan to replace Robin Hood the right school districts sharing the wealth with the poor school districts.

Some proponents say the plan will provide adequate education for every school child in Texas while others have serious doubts about the program being equal and fair to all concerned.

CLOSER TO HOME, our elected representatives are holding firm to a program that assures equity in funding to provide quality education for school children of wealthy and poor school districts.

While the governor waits for consensus from both sides of the issue, the people of the Joint Select Committee told Texans last week that, for all practical purposes, spell T-A-X-E-S. The plan features real potential for tax increases.

For starters, the panel has told Texans that they are looking at increasing the sales tax rate, adding items to goods and services subject to the sales tax, imposing a statewide property tax, levy property taxes, or increase "sin" (tobacco) taxes.

The problem is of long standing and certainly the haves and the have-nots are hoping for an easy solution. The haves want to eliminate Robin Hood because, in the short or long run, because they have the means to find an easy fix.

IT'S A TOTALLY different story for hundreds of school districts like Laredo ISD and United ISD. We concur that if the state leadership wants to ax the present system of funding public schools, the same leadership should replace it with a program that assures equity. Equity will get us closer to adequate and fair, regardless of party labels.

A LAREDO VOLUNTEER with a TAMIU group reached the newsroom last week to report on the fine work U.S. college students are doing in the city of Rio Bravo. Some 150 college students from different parts of Texas and the U.S. were at construction sites last week, helping to build five homes in Rio Bravo.

The collegians were in town under the auspices of Laredo Habitat for Humanity. Carol Sherwood, volunteer executive director for Habitat, says the collegians come to Laredo during spring break from

classes, electing to engage in helping others instead going to the beach.

Several days ago, 13 young men and women, all students from Tiffin University in Ohio, made a pit stop at the Laredo Morning Times. Sherwood brought them to the newspaper on the day they were returning to their college campus.

“THEY LOVED LAREDO and the people they worked with,” Sherwood said. “They were surprised with the growth of the city. They had been here with the same program before. They loved their stay and they were overwhelmed with the reception they got everywhere.” Our associate, Delia Ruiz, El Tiempo coordinator, joined us at a conference room session with the Tiffin University students. The day before they had been treated to breakfast at IHOP by one of the Habitat beneficiary families. The collegians were Kristy Lotycz of Fremont, Laurie Phillips of Wooster, Rachel DeRoeck of Fenton, Kristen Seeley of Columbus, Donnie Graves of Perkins, Will Clay of Defiance, Brian Kingsborough of Castelia, Josh Dewar of Tiffin, Emili Douglas of Peru, Emily Hurt of Medina, Miranda Kritzar of Findlay, J.R. Nouyen of Columbus, Jonathan Young of Berlin Heights and Sarah Witt of Cleveland.

NOW THAT THE presidente municipal, Pepe Suarez, and Mayor Betty Flores have entered into another memorandum of understanding, we suspect the public has a clearer understanding about the proposed fifth international bridge.

That is, unless Webb County people do not corral the same Nuevo Laredo mayor into another round of memorandums. Suarez had a one-on-one lunch the other day with the city mayor. About the same time, Webb County officials went through a similar photo opportunity meeting across the creek.

Before or after these chance meetings, a Nuevo Laredo city hall delegation exchanged similar courtesies with Laredo officials in City Council chambers. Along the way, the city purchased a 17-acre tract from United Independent School District downriver from Laredo for the comfortable sum of \$42,000 when, unknown to UISD, the Webb County Appraisal District had pegged a value of \$754,000 to the land. The rest is history.

MEANWHILE, FLORES and Suarez entered this memorandum of understanding, that among other things, defines “the most suitable location for the new crossing” and fixes the location at 9.2 miles downriver from Bridge 1, specifically 99 degrees, 29 minutes, 32.44 seconds longitude; 27 degrees, 23 minutes, 20 seconds, latitude. It goes on to say “it’s the most convenient place for the proposed connection of access roads to the new crossing.” Strangely enough, this is exactly how the county Planning Department people viewed that south Laredo acreage as “the most convenient for access” to roads on the U.S. side and the Mexican side. The county judge’s staff does not list any engineer or surveyor, but we suspect the county Planning people have a real clue about longitude and altitude to go with attitude.

On the other hand, we think UISD acted accordingly by washing its hands on the city-county dispute over the 17-acre land sale to the city. UISD had joined the city in a motion to the Appraisal Review Board (ARB) to correct the appraisal on the tract.

The school district withdrew its motion last week, electing to stay out of the city-county dispute, not withstanding the fact that the UISD authorized the sale in December, a warranty deed was issue Jan. 21, and the City Council approved the purchase in closed meeting Feb. 2 and issued payment the next day.

UISD board member Ricardo Molina made the point: “It (the property) no longer belongs to us and we’re going to let the city and the county settle their own affairs.” We suspect the Webb County

Appraisal District board will have something to say about that and act accordingly after the ARBs act on the intervention by the city and the county. The ARB, scheduled to hear the matter March 30, is composed of Gustavo Garcia, Sabas Perez, Jose Vasquez, Carlos Cruz and Carlos Zuñiga.

(Odie Arambula is editor of the Laredo Morning Times. He can be reached at 728-2561 or e-mail, Odie@lmtonline.com)

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