‘Pressure is on’ to address property taxes, school finance

Less than a month. That’s how much time Texas lawmakers have left in this year’s legislative session to pass key issues such as the budget, property tax relief and school finance measures.

“Outside of those with a dog in the hunt, or those whose job it is to stay attuned to what is happening in Austin, most Texans are not paying all that much attention to the legislative session this spring,” said Mark P. Jones, a political science professor at Rice University in Houston.

Lawmakers seem to be focusing on bread-and-butter issues — rather than social issues — which “is often as boring as it is complex for most people who have been much more concerned about the Rockets, Rangers and Coachella than about what’s happening in the Texas Legislature,” he said.

Now the Legislature is kicking into overdrive as key issues remain up in the air and state leaders are working to make sure they get to Gov. Greg Abbott’s desk before 86th session wraps up Memorial Day.

Lawmakers know that in the absence of a special session this is their only chance to pass new laws until 2021, since they only meet for 140 days every other year.

“The pressure is on,” Jones said. “While there is still ample time to come to a consensus on property tax and public education reform prior to sine die, the clock is ticking.”

Here’s a look at some measures still up in the air.

THE BUDGET

There’s only one piece of legislation that lawmakers must finish during their 140-day session — a budget to fund state operations for the next two years.

In March, the House signed off on a two-year, $251 billion budget that includes an extra $9 billion for public education. Of that, $6 billion is for school districts and $3 billion is for property tax relief. This plan calls for drawing $2 billion from the state’s so-called Rainy Day Fund.

Last month, the Senate unanimously passed a two-year, $248 billion budget that includes a $6.3 billion boost for public schools. It includes $2.7 billion to lower property taxes and $800 million to boost border security.

The bill was sent to a conference committee.

PROPERTY TAX RELIEF

Identical plans to give Texans property tax relief were filed in the House and Senate Jan. 31, as Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and House Speaker Dennis Bonnen said they would work together on the issue. Abbott last year in his re-election campaign said he wanted to cap property tax revenue increases at 2.5%.

The House version of Senate Bill 2 — geared to slow the future growth of property tax bills — caps property tax revenue at 3.5% for cities and counties without voter approval. Officials say school district property taxes will be addressed separately.

“It gives our taxpayers more control over their taxes,” state Rep. Dustin Burrows, a Lubbock Republican who authored the bill in the House, has said. “This bill doesn’t lower anyone’s property taxes.”

The Senate version differs and includes a 2.5% cap for school districts. School taxes make up about half of a property tax bill. SB 2 is expected to head to a conference committee.

“In the final days of the legislative session, I am confident this historic legislation, combined with additional reforms working their way through the system, will reach my desk where I will sign them into law,” Abbott said in a statement.

Also, House Joint Resolution 3, a tax swap that raises sales taxes 1 percent — to 9.25 percent in most of the state — was approved by a House Committee Wednesday night. The goal of the proposal is to generate money to reduce school property tax bills.
SCHOOL FINANCE
HB 3, the school finance bill, passed the House in early April. The measure puts an extra $9 billion into Texas schools, includes pay raises for most full-time school employees and rewrites the way public education is funded in Texas. It boosts the amount of funding for every student by nearly $900, drops the amount of money wealthy districts pay through the so-called Robin Hood plan and more.

The Senate Education Committee recently approved the bill, sending it on its way to the full Senate. “None of this is easy,” said Jones, the Rice professor. “The complicated nature of trying to simultaneously pass property tax reform which will directly or indirectly reduce ISD revenue while also boosting state funding for K-12 education, and delivering a balanced budget, is going to make for a very stressful month of May.”

TEACHER PAY
Abbott has long talked about the need to give Texas teachers a raise. The House included a provision that all full-time school employees — teachers, librarians, custodial workers, nurses and more — get an average raise of around $1,850 a year in HB 3. School administrators would not receive these raises.
The Senate previously called for a $5,000 teacher and librarian pay raise in HB 1 and have added that in to their version of HB 3. Differences in the bill are expected to be worked out in conference committee.

SCHOOL SAFETY
Last year, shortly after the deadly Santa Fe school shooting, Abbott unveiled a 40-point school safety plan designed to keep students, teachers and school employees safe. It touched on mental health evaluations to identify some students who might be at risk of hurting others, campus security programs and more.
The Senate approved SB 11, which addresses mental health measures in school, creates school safety committees and teams to ID students who might be dangerous. The bill is by state Sen. Larry Taylor, a Friendswood Republican whose district includes Santa Fe High School.
“Our goal is that no child will ever feel afraid at school and no Texas family will ever experience the grief that followed the horrible school shooting at Santa Fe High School,” Patrick said in a statement after the bill recently was approved by the Senate. “The safety of our children remains paramount.”
The bill is headed to the House.

RED LIGHT CAMERAS
Red light cameras have drawn their fair share of attention in the Texas Legislature this year. A plan to turn them off statewide was buoyed when Abbott threw his support behind it, but since then it has appeared to flounder.
HB 1631 by state Rep. Jonathan Stickland, RBedford, was approved by the House Transportation Committee more than a month after testimony was taken and sent to the Calendars Committee, the last stop before a bill is sent to the House floor. In the Senate, SB 653 was approved by committee and could reach the floor any day.
A separate measure that would prevent county officials from rejecting vehicle registrations because of unpaid red light tickets also seems to be moving slowly. HB 901 was approved by House Committee and sent to the Calendars Committee, where it has been for weeks. The companion bill, SB 413, has not had a hearing.