

House passes state tax cut

United Press International
AUSTIN — The biggest tax reduction in Texas history, a \$257.7 million cut in sale taxes on utility bills and in inheritance taxes, has passed its first test in the legislature.

The House tentatively approved both major sections of the bill by overwhelming votes yesterday, and scheduled it for a final vote today before sending it to the Senate.

The tax reductions would become effective July 1 if both the House

and the Senate approve the bill by a two-thirds majority.

The measure, sponsored by Rep. Joe Wyatt, D-Victoria, repeals the 4 per cent state sales tax on residential utility bills and revises the exemptions on inheritance taxes.

The repeal of the sales tax on utility bills would save consumers \$229.3 million in the next two years, and the expansion of the inheritance tax exemptions would reduce those taxes by another \$8.3 million.

If all cities in Texas decided to go

along with the tax reduction idea and repeal the 1 per cent city sales tax on utility bills, consumer bills would be reduced an additional \$44.7 million in the next biennium.

Wyatt said the tax reduction will force the legislature to limit increases in state spending to no more than 31 per cent during the next two years.

"It was felt by the Ways and Means Committee that if we maintained the increase in spending to 30 to 31 per cent, the growth of the

sales tax would keep pace and there would be no need for new taxes in future sessions of the legislature," Wyatt said.

"I think we can cut taxes and provide relief for the people and we can provide the services the people of this state are asking for and indeed demanding."

Attempts to reduce the general sales tax by 1 per cent were defeated, as were efforts to repeal the sales tax on commercial utility bills and to repeal the city sales on utility

bills. The Senate yesterday quickly approved and sent to the House a proposed constitutional amendment by Sen. Lindon Williams, D-Houston, authorizing issuance of an additional \$200 million in bonds for the Veterans Land Program.

The program, created to provide low interest loans to veterans for the purchase of land, already has authorized \$500 million in bonds, but Williams said only \$57 million remain unissued.

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Celebration climaxes in New Orleans

Record crowds at Mardi Gras

United Press International
NEW ORLEANS — Beer kegs, painted faces, five-hour parades and orderly crowds were among the hallmarks of this year's Mardi Gras celebration.

Canal Street was a solid mass of revelers last night for the Krewe of Proteus parade, the last before today's "Fat Tuesday" celebration which ends Mardi Gras.

On Bourbon Street, beer kegs

stretched 10 and 20 in a row on sidewalks, waiting to be tapped for the crowds.

Police said the crowds were mostly quiet and orderly, though there were more than 800 arrests in the eight-day period preceding Mardi Gras on such charges as public intoxication, selling without a permit and theft.

"I wouldn't want to call it unusually quiet," said Sgt. George Bourgeois. "It's relatively quiet, though."

Enterprising artists getting a jump on the day when parade-goers traditionally wear masks, sprinkled glitter on faces — for \$2 to \$5 — in

historic Jackson Square in the heart of the French Quarter.

"The worst thing with our regular life is that everybody is holding in so much," said Trich Liss, 29, of Springfield, Ill., who painted bright green and blue lines around the full beard of her friend, Ed Hawkes, 23.

"With Mardi Gras, everybody is letting go," she said. "That's why it's so much fun."

Cans and bottles clanked underfoot with every step, and dozens of people openly violated the city ordinance requiring alcoholic beverages be in paper or plastic cups. Few in the crowd walked without drinks in their hands.

Five parades were planned downtown today and several more were set in the suburbs in the final hours before midnight, when police clear the streets and Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent.

Drug arrests were down substantially from previous years, and French Quarter bar owner Jim Monaghan said, "People are drinking more this year instead of smoking dope."

Officials reported all 20,000 hotel rooms in the city were booked months in advance, and Bill Curl of the New Orleans Tourist Commission said it was "close to the biggest Mardi Gras ever."

Ford says he could make 1980 bid

United Press International
NEW YORK — Gerald Ford is a private citizen now, but he makes it clear that he still considers himself a contender in the political arena and warns other White House aspirants to keep their hands off "the mantle of leader" in the Republican Party.

In a pre-taped interview, slated for airing today by ABC's "Good Morning America," Ford told host David Hartman he intends to remain politically active, meeting frequently with the Republican leadership. He added, "I just don't want to be one person at this stage of the game to preempt the next Republican nomination."

"It's possible things might develop where I would have an interest, and the party would want me to go," he said of his own chances of winning the nomination. "I certainly don't want someone today to say, 'I'm the only potential nominee and I'm going to run the show for the next four years.'"

Ford said he and his wife will be in Washington on March 25-26 to meet with GOP House and Senate leaders.

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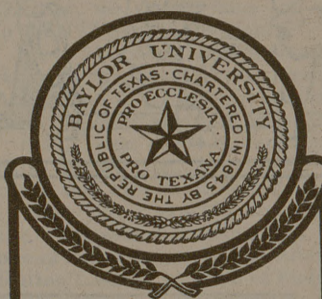
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