

Tuesday, March 5, 1991

The Battalion

Senate declines appointing Rains to state agency

Lawmakers say department requires different management

AUSTIN (AP) — The nomination of former secretary of state Jack Rains to serve on the Texas Department of Commerce board was rejected Monday by the Senate.

Rains, a Republican and political ally of former Gov. Bill Clements, had served on the board only since August, pending the confirmation vote. But some Democratic lawmakers said the host of problems surfacing at the agency convinced them new management is needed.

Sen. Temple Dickson, D-Sweetwater, led opposition to Rains. He said the department failed to help many Texas businesses, and he charged that money was shifted from various economic development programs to cover administrative costs.

"This agency above any other in the state has the ability to rescue the jobless, to help people who are in economic distress, to take care of the businesses ... And it's not doing that," Dickson said. "I don't think we have a good hand on the reins with Mr. Rains there."

In a phone interview from Houston, Rains said he appreciated the backing of "the courageous Democratic senators who did so despite tremendous partisan pressure."

Sen. Chet Brooks, D-Pasadena, said he didn't blame Rains for the agency's problems. But he said Gov. Ann Richards deserved the chance to put her own people in charge.

"That department is troubled, badly troubled, and needs new leadership," Brooks said.

"Sadly, in the last few days, we have seen a whole series of problems disclosed in that department ... She (Richards) needs all the appointments she can possibly get," he said.

In recent days, the department's executive director has resigned, and lawmakers have complained about a private tourism promoter receiving office space and computer services at Commerce Department headquarters.

Richards blasted the department for spending \$115,000 to take more than a dozen officials to Frankfurt, Germany, to open a state trade office there.

And on Friday, the state comptroller began auditing the agency, while federal investigators were looking into its handling of job training money.

But Sen. J.E. "Buster" Brown, R-Lake Jackson, said Rains had a solid track record in business and government and would do a good job promoting the Texas economy.

"Jack Rains is a talented businessman, a political and civic leader, who has wide national and international contacts and is a man who understands how to run a business and an agency," Brown said. "His experience and qualifications are equal to or superior to any of those chosen to serve."

Brown blamed criticism of Rains on partisan politics that followed his "activist" tenure as Clements' secretary of state.

"During that time, he ... was an aggressive, active secretary of state. He also was active in the workers' compensation battle here before the Legislature," Brown said.

"Of course, when you are actively involved in shaping policy, you do sometimes cause people to be opposed to your continuing in public service," he said.

"If you've been sitting on the board while the decisions have been made and money has been spent, then you must expect that probably you are not going to get the approval of the Senate," she said.



KARL STOLLEIS/The Battalion

Ride em' cowboy!

Randy Bryant hangs on for the last seconds of his qualifying ride Friday night at the Houston Championship Rodeo. The finals of the rodeo were held Sunday night in Houston.

School funding plans differ

Court orders Senate, House to revise bills

AUSTIN (AP) — Lawmakers were appointed Monday to work on differences between House and Senate school finance reform bills, but a key senator said the House plan would violate the Texas Constitution.

"It may not be unconstitutional today, but it has the potential for a growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest" school districts, said Sen. Carl Parker, Senate Education Committee chairman.

The Texas Supreme Court has ordered lawmakers to equitably fund poor school districts.

The current \$14-billion-a-year school finance system relies on state aid, local property taxes and some federal money. Disparities in local property tax wealth can cause wide differences in funding.

Both the House and Senate bills would impose a minimum local property tax rate, and shift some of the tax revenue from wealthier to poorer school districts within newly created taxing regions.

The minimum local property tax rate would be 80 cents per \$100 valuation in four years under the House bill, and \$1 in four years under the Senate bill. The House bill

would create 195 taxing regions, and the Senate measure, 20.

Both bills would allow school districts to levy up to another 30 cents to enrich programs, and up to another 20 cents for construction. Every school district would be guaranteed the same amount of money at those tax rates.

On top of that, the House bill would allow school districts to levy additional local property taxes and keep half the revenue. The other half would be divided among school districts in a particular taxing region. The additional taxes could not bring the total levy over \$1.50.

This provision was added to the House bill after the Texas Supreme Court last week issued a new opinion saying absolute funding equity may not be needed for a constitutional school finance system.

But Parker, D-Port Arthur, said some sort of limit should be set to forestall wide spending gaps between poor and rich school districts.

Named to the conference committee on school finance reform were, from the Senate, Parker; Bill Haley, D-Center; Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin; Bill Ratliff, R-Mount Pleasant; and Gene Green, D-Houston.

Emergency bill frees funds to fight bees

AUSTIN (AP) — Gov. Ann Richards granted emergency status to a bill that would appropriate \$262,000 through August to the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Weslaco to battle killer bees.

The first known swarm of the ill-tempered, Africanized bees to invade the United States was trapped and destroyed in October near the southern border city of Hidalgo.

None have been trapped in the United States since then, but scientists and beekeepers are preparing for new swarms of the bees to invade South Texas from Mexico this month. They say an infestation is inevitable.

State Rep. Renato Cuellar, D-Weslaco, said Richards' emergency declaration should speed his bill through the Legislature.

"The bees could pose complications for the agricultural industry in the Rio Grande Valley if we do not deal with them properly," Cuellar said.

The \$262,000 would go toward inspections of bee hives that are suspected of invasion by the Africanized bees, Cuellar said.

If an infestation is detected, a two-mile radius would be quarantined and no hives within that area could be moved, he said.

Cuellar said the bill would also help clear up misinformation about the bees.

Officials in the United States and Mexico over the past three years have placed hundreds of traps baited with a sex lure to track the bees and slow their advance. The highly defensive bees have expanded their range northward since they

escaped from a breeding experiment in Brazil in 1957.

They earned the "killer" nickname because they attack intruders in swarms and chase them for long distances. European bees commonly used in America lost their fighting spirit through centuries of breeding for agriculture.

The pioneer swarm trapped in Texas Oct. 15 triggered a quarantine of the state's eight southernmost counties.

Fowden Maxwell, head of the entomology department at Texas A&M University, and other officials have expressed concern that other states may place a quarantine on all Texas bees if they decide the state has not done enough to manage the Africanized bees.

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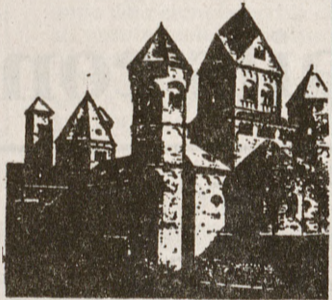
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