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Texans vote to abolish state Treasury

Supporters say merging the agency with the comptroller's office will save money and cut government jobs.

AUSTIN (AP) — State Treasurer Martha Whitehead couldn't be happier that Texans voted to fire her.

After all, she asked them to let her go.

"I'll be looking for another job, because I'm not ready to retire yet," Mrs. Whitehead said as voters Tuesday overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment to abolish the Treasury.

The Democrat, who was elected just last year, wouldn't say what her next step will be. But she promised, "I'm not going to close the door on any public or private sector opportunities that are out there."

Mrs. Whitehead, who campaigned last year with a vow to eliminate her own job, isn't

headed out of the treasurer's post immediately. The transfer of duties from her office to the state comptroller is effective Sept. 1, 1996.

The treasurer serves as the state's banker, invests public funds and oversees the unclaimed property program that tries to return assets abandoned in private accounts.

Supporters say merging the agency with the comptroller's office will save money and cut government jobs. Among the proponents was Comptroller John Sharp, who praised Mrs. Whitehead's "unselfishness and ... real commitment to fiscal conservatism."

"It may have happened before in Texas history, but I don't know anyone who ever stood up and said, 'I want to get rid of my job,'" he said.

But others, such as Texas GOP Chairman Tom Pauken, called the move ill-advised.

Pauken said he could understand Texans' vote because he initially supported the merger

idea himself. But he said, "I do think we'll find out in the long run that all these highly touted savings ... are going to turn out to be illusory."

Opponents of the proposal also argued that a fundamental principle of public policy is to keep separate the departments that collect funds and those that spend funds.

"At some point, without having checks and balances, there's going to be a major problem with too much power being concentrated in John Sharp's office," Pauken said.

Mrs. Whitehead, noting that a Republican lawmaker helped sponsor the measure in the Texas House, said the idea had bipartisan support in the Legislature.

"It shows the hypocrites that are leading the Republican Party in Texas, like Tom Pauken," said Mrs. Whitehead, a Democrat. "If a Republican had been treasurer and was campaigning for this cause, I would have been the toast of their party."

Sketch



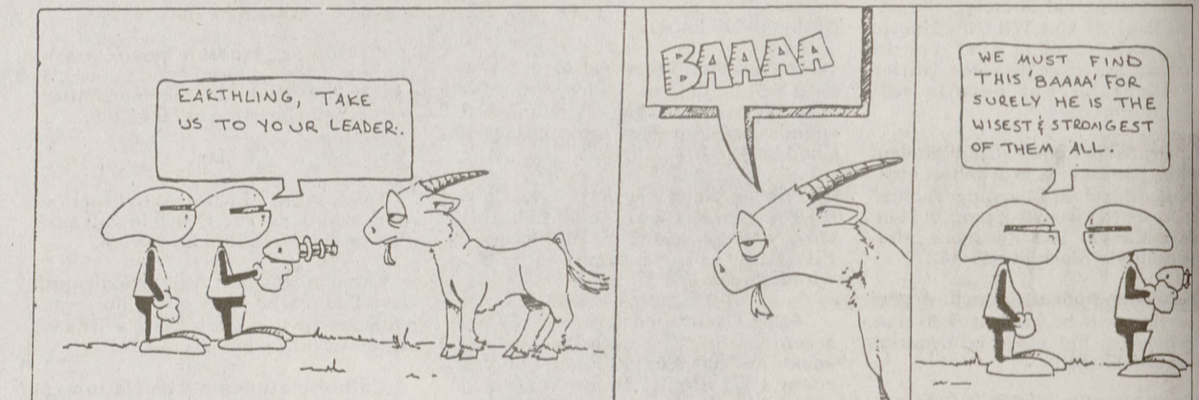
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