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Bill would speed up adoptions

AUSTIN (AP) — Lawmakers and Gov. George W. Bush joined forces Thursday to push legislation designed to speed up adoptions in Texas.

Bush and the legislators said the children deserve no less than quick placement in good homes.

"Adoption is the loving option. Adoption means a brighter future for thousands of Texas children," Bush said.

He said the adoption reform bill says to children, "Texas wants to help find you a loving home as fast as we can and as compassionately as possible. The proposed laws say to prospective parents, 'We want you to adopt, we encourage you, and we will make it easier for you to adopt a child in Texas.'"

A study by a special gubernatorial task force said that in April 1996, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services — the state's child welfare agency — re-

ported nearly 12,000 children were in foster care. Of those, nearly 1,400 were legally free for adoption.

However, it said, while improvements had been made in the child welfare system, many children spent far too long in foster care before being permanently placed in homes.

Statistics for the 1991-1995 fiscal years showed children who were adopted spent an average of 40.8 months in the system before the adoption was completed. Those children averaged four temporary placements before adoption.

Lawmakers said the bill to be considered would put children into adoptive homes earlier, shorten the time needed to terminate parental rights and finalize adoptions and provide more security that adoptions won't later be challenged.

Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, the chief sponsor of the bill, said it is important to get children into adoptive homes quicker.

"What we have learned over the years is that the greatest problem related to foster care is the children age out of the process," Mrs. Zaffirini said. "They move from foster home to foster home and finally they age out and ... they are out on the street. We are going to stop that."

Sen. Florence Shapiro, Plano, a cosponsor, said the measure will make Texas a better place for children and adoptive parents.

"For too long, Texas has been dubbed an unfriendly adoption state. Too many of our constituents have decided to go not only out of state to adopt children, but out of the country," she said.

Lawmakers said they expected the bill to speed through the Legislature. "We already have the votes to pass the bill," said Mrs. Zaffirini, who has 26 cosponsors in the member chamber.

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Property tax plan raises talk of overhaul

AUSTIN (AP) — Gov. George W. Bush's call to lower local school property taxes has raised talk of overhauling the state's 70-year-old tax system.

Rep. Paul Sadler, D-Henderson, chair of the committee considering Bush's plan, said Thursday he's excited about the prospects of scouring the nearly three-inch-thick state tax code.

Sadler is leading the charge to review every state tax — and every tax exemption — to determine which should stay, which should be changed and which should go.

"Don't you like that idea?" he asked. "I do."

Rep. Ric Williamson, R-Weatherford, a member of the House Select Committee on Revenue and Public Education Funding, called the effort a sunset on the tax code.

"Isn't it interesting what the light of day exposes?" Williamson asked as the committee looked at tax exemptions, some as old as state taxation.

"Many of these exemptions have been in existence for 70 years," Williamson said. "In hindsight, one might say these exemptions might not deserve continuation. They might have deserved continuation in 1921."

Williamson and others credit Bush for starting the debate that has led to the review of all state taxes and tax exemptions.

For his part, Bush remained optimistic about chances for school tax relief, and said the lawmakers' inquiries only will help reach that goal.

"I tell you, we're making good progress on the issue," he said. "They are going to look at all kinds of ways on how to achieve the objectives of cutting school taxes. ... It's a healthy debate for Texas."

For nearly two years Bush has said local school property taxes are too high.

In January, the governor proposed a new business tax, an increase to the state sales tax and motor vehicle tax and the use of \$1 billion in additional state funds to lower local school taxes by \$3 billion a year.

Members of the House committee have set Bush's plan aside for now.

One idea being considered would lower school property taxes by \$3.6 billion a year. To do this, local school property taxes would be cut to 50

cents per \$100 valuation on residential property and \$1 per \$100 valuation on all other property. There would be no exemptions under the plan, which has not been formally voted on nor adopted.

That tax plan — combined with \$18 billion in state funds set to be spent on education in the 1998-99 budget years — still would leave more money for the state to come up with in order to reach the total \$38 billion scheduled to be spent on education.

To get there, the House committee is looking first at tax exemptions. Millions in potential dollars aren't collected each year because of tax exemptions.

The committee has all but decided to leave food and medicine untaxed and some social welfare, church and civic groups exempt from some taxes. All other state tax exemptions are being considered.

Rep. Kim Brimer, R-Kennedale and a member of the committee says some will have to go. "We need to look at ways to broaden the scope. That starts with exemptions," he said.



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