

Decision urged on welfare privatization

► **Phil Gramm pushes White House to quickly approve welfare privatization in Texas.**

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal government's consideration of a ground-breaking proposal to place Texas' welfare operations in the hands of private industry is taking too long for some Texans, including Sen. Phil Gramm.

The Clinton administration had promised Texas a decision by March 31 on what amounts to the most far-reaching welfare privatization plan yet advanced by any state. Failure to meet that deadline drew the ire of Gov. George W. Bush and now has prompted Gramm to wade into the fray.

Amid signs that decision-making on the politically sensitive issue has been bumped from the Department of Health and Human Services up to the White House, Gramm fired off a letter Wednesday to White House chief of staff Erskine Bowles.

"The state of Texas has been expecting a positive decision on this plan for several months, and I understand the approval is currently being withheld by your office," the Texas Republican wrote. "I urge you to approve the (Texas Integrated Enrollment Services) project without further delay."

Noting that labor leaders have

been lobbying the White House to reject the proposal, Gramm added, "I certainly hope that you will permit anyone to inject politics into this policy decision."

The Texas request places the White House in a delicate situation, forcing the administration to balance the concerns of its labor constituency against President Clinton's promise to give states new flexibility to craft their own welfare reform.

Bowles informed the governor Wednesday, after Bush had called him unsuccessfully three times as many days, that a decision is "soon," said Bush spokeswoman Karen Hughes.

"Soon in Texas apparently does not mean the same thing as soon in Washington," said Hughes, terming the governor "frustrated and somewhat incredulous" about the delay.

HHS spokesman Michael K. O'Connell said the White House has been involved in discussions over the Texas proposal since early on, in part because the plan cuts across several federal agencies.

"We are very optimistic that we will be able to provide a decision on the state imminently, but the decision-making is still under way," Kharken said Wednesday.

Texas wants approval from the feds to establish a plan intended to provide one-stop shopping for assistance ranging from food stamps and Medicaid to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Defense may step in on voting-rights case

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Defense Department will intervene if necessary in a West Texas voting-rights case challenging the right of military personnel to vote in local elections when stationed elsewhere.

Defense Secretary William Cohen pledged the federal intervention in a letter to Rep. Henry Bonilla. The San Antonio Republican made the letter public Wednesday.

"The Defense Department and the Justice Department have agreed that our service members should not be held to a different standard than other absentee voters, and that the Justice Department will promptly participate in the case should it appear necessary to protect this important interest," Cohen wrote.

Bonilla termed Cohen's pledge "a step in the right direction." The victories last November of two Republicans in local Val Verde County races prompted lawsuits questioning the validity of some mail-in ballots cast by out-of-town military members.

At issue is whether military personnel and their dependents, some of whom have never lived in Val Verde County or have been absent for years, should have the right to vote in local elections.

Eight hundred mail-in ballots

cast almost entirely by military personnel and their dependents were credited with giving the two Republicans victory in local sheriff and county commission races.

A federal judge has barred the state from taking office until several questions are settled in a state lawsuit filed by the Democratic losers in the election against the Republican winners. In addition, a federal lawsuit protesting the election has been filed.

The winner in the county commissioner race, Murry Kachel, announced last week that he would accept the post, following lingering controversy over his past membership in the Ku Klux Klan.

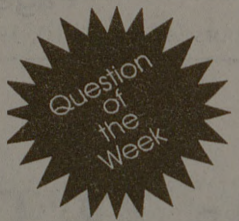
Texas has a flexible definition of residency that depends largely on the voter's intent. Service members can apply for a mail-in ballot by supplying a Texas address for a place where voter plans to return to someday.

Mail-in ballot users can vote local elections without actually owning property at that address, even being registered to vote in the county under current state law.

Under a bill by Rep. Hugo Bortega, D-Corpus Christi, military personnel would have to be registered to vote in a county in order to receive a full ballot that includes local and statewide elections.

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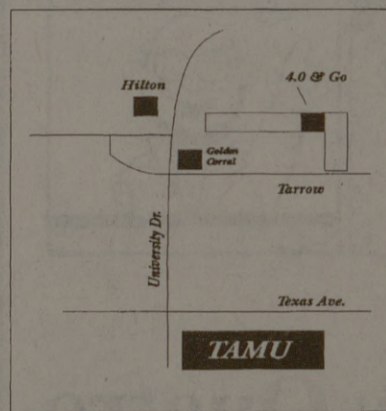
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