Sen. Rodríguez statement on the budget

Austin – The Texas Legislature today voted on the state budget in both the House and Senate. Sen. Rodríguez joined the House members of the El Paso delegation in voting for the budget. (NOTE: Specific items of local interest at bottom of statement)

"This was a tough vote," Sen. Rodríguez said. "There are missed opportunities in the budget that will hurt the state's ability to continue competing in the future."

In particular, while the state added enough money to account for overall growth in the number of students, maintaining a per-student funding level of $5,140, it did not account for inflation, which means the dollar per student doesn't go as far. It also undercounted our Medicaid obligations over the next two years; this means that it projects a lower number than we'll actually have, something that has become routine and that ensures each session begins with an "iou" of between $1 billion and $2 billion.

"Instead of prioritizing these needs, the state instead put nearly $1 billion into 'border security,' a phrase that inaccurately frames our communities as threats, instead of as the opportunities that we are. El Paso and other border communities are important to the state and nation for trade, cultural exchange, and great places to live and work," Sen. Rodríguez said.

"Further, our communities have generally low crime rates - especially El Paso, which has overall rates below the state average - and there's no evidence that the state has diminished crime rates or availability of drugs. Given the enormous expenditures, one would expect to see some data to indicate what Texas taxpayers got for their money."

While there were missed opportunities, and some misplaced priorities, the state took a step forward in some areas. The budget, filed as Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), establishes a $107.8 billion budget (General Revenue (GR) + Economic Stabilization Fund (ESF)) for FY 18-19, including $990 million from the ESF for local grants, state hospitals, capital needs and other onetime expenditures.

The Health and Human Services budget includes $500 million in increased funding to Child Protective Services, which will pay for nearly 600 new caseworkers. It provides additional funding for mental
health services, including a total of $160.5 million to address community mental health services added capacity, waitlists, collaborative grants for jail diversion, and psychiatric hospital beds.

Other budget highlights include an additional $350 million for the Teacher Retirement System, $71 million to the TEXAS Grant Program, and $44 million for Graduate Medical Education (GME).

"It is said that a budget is an expression of priorities. If so, much in this budget, like border security funding, represents misplaced priorities," Rodríguez said. "But it also attempts a careful balance of interests, based on hard numbers and factual data. We've made the mistake of constraining ourselves to the point where we struggle to meet our needs, even though we have the means to do so. Without doing something extraordinary, this budget reflects the best effort this body is able to make.

"It is in that spirit that I vote for this budget."

Some El Paso area highlights:

- Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center-El Paso received $142 million for the biennium, including a rider to establish the dental school.
- UTEP received $229.2 million for the biennium, including continued support for the pharmacy school.
- EPCC received $63.6 million for the biennium.
- Intelligent Transportation System: Authorization for $32 million for a system to streamline commercial traffic at the Zaragoza Bridge and Bridge of the Americas.
- McDonald Observatory: $5.2 million for the biennium.
- Rio Grande Compact / Texas-New Mexico Water Lawsuit: $500,000, and allowance for increments of $1 million.
- 8th Court of Appeals District, El Paso: $3.374 million for the biennium.

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José Rodríguez represents Texas Senate District 29, which includes the counties of El Paso, Hudspeth, Culberson, Jeff Davis, and Presidio. Senator Rodríguez currently serves as the Chairman of the Texas Senate Democratic Caucus.

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