Dear Friends:

I had a lot of hope at the opening of the 86th Legislature that we would focus on substantive policy issues rather than divisive, partisan matters. For the most part, the legislative session lived up to those expectations.

The Legislature tackled some very big, challenging issues, such as school finance and property taxes. I was pleased to be in the middle of those discussions as a member of the conference committee that negotiated the school finance legislation, HB 3, as well as a Senate workgroup that tried to find new sources of state revenue to offset greater property tax cuts. That revenue conversation is ongoing and will be key to keeping the promises of HB 3.

We also made great progress toward shoring up the Teacher Retirement System of Texas and will provide retired teachers an additional annuity check of up to $2,000 this fall. But the Legislature didn’t come through for state employees and the Employees Retirement System of Texas, a failure that must be rectified.

It was a special, neat honor to be elected by my colleagues as President Pro Tempore of the Senate for the 86th Legislature. I was also recognized by Texas Monthly magazine as one of the best legislators in its biennial list, and received top scores from environmental and consumer organizations.

And I passed legislation that, among other things:

- bolstered government transparency with fixes to the Public Information Act and the Open Meetings Act;
- strengthened sexual assault laws;
- improved oversight of child care operations; and
- invested in better brain health services.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to serve you in the Texas Senate.

Sincerely,

Kirk Watson
SCHOOL FINANCE & PROPERTY TAXES

The Texas Legislature came into the session in January better positioned than ever before to achieve something big on both school finance and property taxes — two issues that are inextricably linked.

Higher-than-expected revenues during the 2018-19 budget helped the state dig out of a significant budget hole and begin the 2019 legislative session with the resources needed to tackle those huge policy challenges.

And the hard work of the Texas Commission on Public School Finance created a good policy basis for the legislation that ultimately passed, HB 3.

As a member of the conference committee that negotiated the final bill, I was able to help craft legislation that included many of my priorities for helping students succeed while also lowering recapture and property taxes. HB 3 won’t meet everyone’s concept of perfection, but it does strike a reasonable balance between investing in education and reducing the state’s reliance on local property taxes.

The changes in HB 3 will help our schools serve students better, particularly through full-day prekindergarten and a true focus on economically disadvantaged children. Both of these reforms will ensure that schools are supporting the students who need it most. Given that Austin, Elgin, Pflugerville and other local school districts have long been paying for full-day prekindergarten on their own, this change will free up local dollars to invest in other educational programs.

The bill also includes new dedicated funding for teachers, librarians, counselors, nurses and others who contribute every day to the success of the children in our public schools.

As for property taxes, I’ve been saying for years that the Legislature is the real culprit in rising property tax bills because the state relies on local property taxes to cover its constitutional obligation to fund public schools. HB 3 is an important step toward addressing that problem.

Putting more state dollars into reducing school tax rates is the only way to achieve real, ongoing property tax relief. Taxpayers will see their school property tax rate drop, but no one should expect a dramatic reduction in their tax bill as a result. This property tax crisis was created over many years through willful inaction by those in control of the Capitol, and it will take a steady commitment over time to fix it. Maintaining that commitment will require the Legislature to take a serious and disciplined look at how to generate additional state revenue.

Nor should folks expect big cuts in their property taxes from a separate piece of legislation, SB 2, which imposes new limits on property taxes for cities and counties. Tinkering with city and county tax rates makes it sound like the Legislature is doing something to provide “relief,” but that approach will do very little, if anything, to actually reduce your property tax bill. It will, however, make it harder for local governments to provide you the services you want for your community, such as public safety, libraries and parks. That’s why I voted against SB 2.

EDUCATION

HB 3 bolsters programs that will have substantial impact on student success and — along with increased funding for other critical programs, such as special education, dual language and dyslexia — will give Texas students the support they need to thrive in school.

As noted earlier, the state will now require full-day prekindergarten for eligible 4-year-old students. We know that children who receive quality early education are more likely to succeed at reading and math in third grade, which is a key indicator of a student’s likely overall success in the future.

In addition, the state is finally recognizing that student success is affected by the concentration of poverty. We will now provide greater funding to schools with higher densities of poverty in an effort to eliminate achievement disparities. These changes are monumental steps forward for schoolchildren.

We’re also helping more adults get their high school diploma with my HB 1051, which expands what had previously been a pilot program developed by the Goodwill Excel Center in Austin. The program has seen incredible successes for its students, with most completing a technical certificate and/or receiving a significant pay increase.

Finally, this was a good session for higher education in Texas. This budget increases higher education funding by over $1 billion compared to the last budget, and most of this money flows through the formulas, ensuring all institutions see a benefit. We also increased the funding for TEXAS Grants and Tuition Equalization Grants, which help students afford higher education, and Graduate Medical Education, which helps keep our medical students practicing in Texas.
**HEALTH**

The intense focus on school finance and property taxes left little room for the Legislature to address some of the critical healthcare issues that Texans face every day. Given the efforts of some in control of the Capitol to dismantle the Affordable Care Act in court, I filed a bill that would have guaranteed insurance protections for those with preexisting health/medical conditions and prevent them from losing coverage. Despite bipartisan statements in support of this principle, this bill was never given a hearing.

Nor did the Legislature do enough to act on the heartbreaking reports of how the state’s Medicaid managed care system is failing some of our most vulnerable Texans – our children. Several legislators, including me, filed bills that would have created more transparency, provided increased protections for patients, ensured a more robust network of doctors and made it easier for children to keep the coverage they so desperately need. But these efforts were blocked, leaving these families with unnecessary hurdles to get the level of care their doctors say is necessary.

Despite those frustrating challenges, we did make progress on some key issues:

**Brain Health**

The Legislature continued the investment in the redesign of the Austin State Hospital and the brain health continuum of care with $165 million to construct the first phase of the replacement hospital.

With this investment, we’re building upon the extraordinary work of the Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin to design a brain health system of care that provides access to the right care at the right time and in the right place. This is a big win in the effort to transform the ASH Brain Health System and demonstrates the Legislature’s commitment to improving access to quality mental health care for all Texans.

In 2017, the Legislature started a three-biennium effort to improve the state psychiatric hospitals and provided $15.5 million for Dell Medical School to conduct an extensive, system-wide programmatic redesign of the Austin State Hospital. Dell Med and the ASH Redesign steering committee members, which includes Integral Care (the local mental health authority) and NAMI Central Texas, developed the plan for a 240-bed, modern psychiatric hospital on the existing campus. The plan is available at www.ASHRedesign.org.

The hospital design is underway with regular consultation with patients, family members, ASH employees, regional providers and the Health and Human Services Commission. During the coming biennium, extensive site preparation will take place and the building’s foundation and exterior will be constructed. The new facility is expected to open in 2023.

In addition, my SB 2111 directs the Health and Human Services Commission to work with stakeholders to develop a plan to address management of ASH in a way that will best maximize care, including potentially a transfer of operations of ASH to the Dell Medical School.

Meanwhile, components of the Austin State Hospital Brain Health System Redesign are being rolled out to begin addressing the problems now. For example, a tele-psychiatry clinic affiliated with Dell Med, Integral Care and/or ASH will provide easier access to care for people experiencing a mental health crisis in one of the 38 counties served by ASH. Such immediate evaluation and connection to the appropriate care will help stabilize and put the person on the quickest path to recovery as close to home and community as possible.

I also carried two priority bills that will help to increase awareness of mental health conditions among younger people, given that many mental health conditions often manifest by age 14:

- HB 18 expands training for school staff to recognize students in distress and help teach them how to handle the situation appropriately. This bill also adds mental health to the health curriculum so that students can better recognize signs of potential mental health conditions amongst themselves or their peers; and
- HB 19 improves coordination between schools and the local mental health authority. This bill ensures more school staff will receive mental health first aid training and/or other training to increase awareness and understanding of mental health and co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders.

**Cancer Research**

Texas voters will decide in November whether to continue our state’s investment in cancer prevention and research through the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT). Teamming up with Sen. Jane Nelson and Rep. John Zerwas, I helped lead the effort to pass HJR 12, which will put a reinvestment proposition in front of voters this fall.

With the creation of CPRIT, Texas has become the second largest source of cancer research funding behind the National Cancer Institute and a significant funder of screening and prevention programs. Some say that cancer research isn’t a core function of state government and the money could be spent on other priorities or that we shouldn’t fund research with debt. Others point out that CPRIT-funded cancer screenings have detected thousands of individuals with cancer or cancer precursors in programs throughout the state. CPRIT has also helped build research infrastructure by, for example, attracting top researchers, including Nobel Prize winner Dr. Jim Allison, who are leading clinical trials and studies in Texas with the aim of, one day, curing cancer.

**Access to Care**

Texans deserve access to affordable health care. The Legislature passed two of my bills that will support our local hospitals and hospital district specifically. SB 1350 will help the community draw down federal funds for care provided to the uninsured and underinsured in Travis County. SB 1142 provides Central Health another tool to provide medical care for indigent and needy residents.

Texas law prohibits price gouging during an emergency because of the inability for a consumer to shop around during such an event. One of my bills, HB 1941, extends this protection to those experiencing an emergency medical situation by prohibiting unconscionable pricing at a freestanding emergency room.
I’ve been working with Rep. Giovanni Capriglione over the past few years to restore the Public Information Act (PIA) after two troubling court cases in 2015. That work finally paid off with the passage of two significant bills:

- SB 943 brings much-needed sunshine to publicly funded state and local contracts so the public can see what they’re buying and if they’re getting what’s promised. This transparency is critical as government outsources more and more services; and
- SB 944 contains a myriad of improvements designed to make the PIA more efficient and accessible, including by ensuring government has a mechanism to retrieve public information stored on officials’ private devices.

Rep. Dade Phelan and I also passed SB 1640, which ensures a recent court decision doesn’t gut the Open Meetings Act by allowing government bodies to make decisions in a series of small, secret meetings.

All three of these bills passed with overwhelming, bipartisan support and will better enable the public to engage with their government and hold elected officials accountable.

The Texas Legislature took a strong stand against sexual assault this session, and four significant bills that I carried were signed into law by the Governor:

- SB 586 ensures peace officer training on child abuse, family violence, and sexual assault includes awareness of trauma and the way it can affect survivors;
- HB 1735 — the Texas IX Act — requires all public and private institutions of higher education to adopt comprehensive policies to prevent sexual violence and fairly investigate sexual violence complaints;
- HB 1590 creates the Sexual Assault Survivors’ Task Force to coordinate state and local efforts to combat sexual violence and help survivors; and
- HB 3809 gives survivors of child sex abuse twice as much time to hold their abusers and the institutions that enable them accountable in our civil courts.

Each of these bills will make a big impact and wouldn’t have been possible without the survivors who bravely shared their stories and advocated for change. They are the real heroes of the session.

Together with Rep. Donna Howard, we passed legislation that one legal expert called the “most significant state sex assault legislation in the country.” Other members of the Legislature had great successes in this area, too, including Rep. Victoria Neave and Sen. Jane Nelson who passed the Lavinia Masters Act (HB 8) to finally tackle the rape kit backlog. Our budget also shows a real commitment to this issue by investing about $75 million in new money to test rape kits, prevent new rape kit backlogs and fund the work of the Sexual Assault Survivors’ Task Force. The budget also tasks the State Auditor’s Office with auditing sexual assault cases throughout the entire criminal justice system. I’m hopeful that the information from this audit and the task force will give us new solutions to better combat sexual assault.

This session, I finished up my service on the Texas Sunset Commission, which recommends whether an agency should continue and, if so, what improvements should be made so it can better serve the public. This was a very busy term for Sunset with over 30 agencies under review. Overall, this effort was very successful, creating better government for the people of Texas.

The Sunset bills I carried through the legislative process included:

- SB 606 to foster more public engagement, transparency, and trust for the Lower Colorado River Authority; and
- SB 608 to require the School Land Board to improve communication and coordination around the management of the Permanent School Fund, which benefits the schoolchildren of Texas.

I also pressed for greater transparency and accountability for the Department of Public Safety, particularly with regard to its border security and drivers license operations, and supported modernizing our byzantine alcohol regulations via the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission’s Sunset bill.

The Sunset bill for the Plumbing Examiners Board created some last-minute drama when the House failed to pass legislation to continue the agency, creating the possibility that the plumbing industry would be deregulated. Gov. Greg Abbott, however, issued an executive order that gives the Plumbing Board two more years to improve its operations and justify its continuance next session.
ELECTIONS

Distrust in our electoral systems is growing. More and more people feel that the foundation of our democracy, the electoral process, is either rigged or filled with fraud. What gets lost in this conversation, however, is that most people agree that our elections must be secure and fair. While there are different ways to achieve these goals, it is important to always keep these priorities as the guiding principle.

This past session, there were proposals that aimed to achieve these goals and increase faith in our democracy. One such bipartisan proposal would have called for the use of voting machines that produce a paper trail. Another would have implemented a fairer redistricting process to create maps where voters — instead of the politicians currently in control of this process — get to determine the outcome of elections. While these proposals did not pass, they represent what should be common ground.

As a member of the newly created Redistricting Committee, I will be listening to communities across the state during this interim and urging my colleagues to create maps in the next legislative session that fairly represent everyone and help restore the public’s faith that their vote matters.

TRANSPORTATION

The 86th Legislature failed to move forward with transportation solutions. No major transportation policy finance bills were seriously considered in the Senate. And every bill that could have helped local transit initiatives was shut down by those who simply oppose any transportation solution that’s not roads.

Central Texans need mobility options and real solutions to the traffic congestion that frustrates all of us. But the state has yet to figure out how to pay for it. While some existing state revenue sources have been redirected toward transportation in recent years, those funds are insufficient to meet the needs of our fast-growing state and region. Yet, the state refuses to face up to that reality.

The state’s inaction also makes it difficult for local communities to innovate and successfully tackle congestion on their own. We must have an honest, open and full conversation that gives real consideration (not political lip service) to the transportation projects we need and how we fund them. In an effort to force that conversation, I filed a series of bills that would have provided different opportunities for increased funding for an array of transportation solutions. Unfortunately, not a single one was even granted a hearing.
The Texas Senate customarily elects a senior member as Senate President Pro Tempore for the legislative session. I was honored to serve in that role for the 86th Legislature. The President Pro Tempore follows the Lieutenant Governor in the line of succession for Governor and legally serves as Governor any time the Governor and Lt. Governor are out of the state. I, therefore, have the wonderful honor of leading the Senate in the role of the Governor for a specific “Governor for a Day” celebration.

On April 6, I celebrated my Governor for a Day with a special day of service with several non-profit organizations around Austin. I also used this unique experience and opportunity to raise money for Huston-Tillotson University scholarships and to help fund programs and scholarships for the Dell Medical School health sciences summer camps for local middle and high school students.

SB 1943 will help people who inherit their homes without a will to get the homestead exemption to which they are entitled. This legislation, which stems from a University of Texas study on gentrification in Austin, will help some longtime residents keep their homes.

Two separate bills recognized the lives and service of Richard Overton, who was the nation’s oldest living World War II veteran at the time of his death in late 2018, and Master Sergeant Jonathan Dunbar, who was killed in action in 2018, by naming two local roadways in their honor.

SB 2553 creates a district around the Lions Municipal Golf Course, granting the neighbors another avenue to engage in preserving the land as a public golf course, public parkland or a combination.

SB 2168 ensures smaller counties devastated by repeated natural disasters, such as Bastrop, can put up less local money for state highway expansion projects. I also amended a separate bill to ensure Smithville will qualify for a new TxDOT program to waive local utility relocation costs for the SH95 expansion now under design.

HB 2978 grants an easement on state land along Shoal Creek Boulevard to allow pedestrian access to a bridge that will cross the creek and connect with the Grove, a mixed-use community under development.

Austinites will have the opportunity to get a Keep Austin Weird license plate with passage of SB 1271.

OTHER BILLS SENATOR KIRK WATSON PASSED IN 2019

THE TEXAS SENATE IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER AND DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE ON THE BASIS OF RACE, COLOR, NATIONAL ORIGIN, SEX, RELIGION, AGE OR DISABILITY IN EMPLOYMENT OR THE PROVISION OF SERVICES.