

## Editorial: Homework for state lawmakers



Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst's latest homework assignments for Senate committees reflect some solid priorities for next year's lawmaking session. But there continue to be blind spots that need to be cleared up. From the "interim charges" issued last week:

### Transportation

Dewhurst wants an examination of the way Texas pays for building and maintaining its highway network and the long-term impact on debt financing. That's important and overdue.

Lawmakers have turned to huge borrowing programs to pay for road projects while refusing to talk seriously about new revenue. That's chicken politics and short-term thinking. As interest on borrowing gobbles bigger chunks of transportation dollars, lawmakers need to see where that road is leading.

One thing lawmakers are asked to examine is “the total cost of vehicle ownership,” which is a good way to get into the relatively low vehicle registration fees Texans pay. That’s one place to raise new road money. Boosting the motor fuels tax for the first time since 1991 is another.

Dewhurst also wants to hear ways to educate the public about the state’s struggle to afford projects that keep pace with population growth. Without major new debt, for example, TxDOT’s Dallas district would not have the green light to replace the I-30 and I-35 bridges downtown.

Texas can’t borrow its way out of congestion, and the public needs to understand that. Dewhurst is as tax-averse as anybody, but he has a responsibility to look out for Texas’ future.

### Criminal justice

One trend emerging from the legal system involves accusations of misconduct by prosecutors. These have arisen in high-profile exoneration cases where prosecutors failed to divulge exculpatory evidence as constitutionally required. Dewhurst’s charges don’t cite this phenomenon, and they should have.

Lawmakers have a duty to examine possible safeguards against abuse, including a requirement that prosecuting and defense attorneys share files before trial. If the state has a flimsy case against someone, it’s crucial to find out before an innocent person spends years in prison, letting the *real* perpetrators run free.

Dewhurst was smart to instruct lawmakers to work on one thing that has bedeviled the Dallas County courthouse: freewheeling practices in the bail bond industry.

Lobbyists for bondsmen have given them a cushy comfort zone where they can artificially manipulate the value of property used as collateral on bonds, thereby boosting their profits. Lawmakers should find ways to clean up this mess of their own making.

Committee members also are asked to study school disciplinary practices, a legitimate area of concern. Black students are three times more likely than whites to be removed from school for lower-level offenses.

Lawmakers must see if and where evenhandedness is off kilter in discretionary punishment. Public schools should not be part of a “cradle-to-prison” pipeline that contributes to a higher incarceration rate for black males.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst should also require analysis of:

**Straight-ticket voting.** One-punch voters dominate the balloting in Dallas County and elsewhere in a mindless approach to picking qualified officeholders. It cries out for reform.

**Stronger pipeline of teachers.** Lawmakers should pick up where they left off last session to insure teachers are better qualified when they reach the classroom and nurtured better afterward.

**Improved middle schools.** Middle grades are make-or-break years and the state should focus resources and innovation on them. Lawmakers should identify best practices.