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Senator ‘Dodges’ Constituents

Texas State social work students gathered Aug. 27 at the LBJ Student Center to meet State Senator Jeff Wentworth [R-25]. The Senator is a Republican and most social workers lean left, but we were nevertheless grateful for the opportunity to hear him address issues that concern us—issues like mental health funding, aid for the poor, job skills training for the under-employed, and child and family services.

However, the senator spent about 40 of his 50 minutes before taking questions talking about the issue of renaming land-grant colleges. The senator’s political career apparently began, according to his story, when he and another Aggie band member journeyed to Austin to lobby a Senator sponsoring a bill to change the name of A&M University to “Texas State.” Fighting the name change appears to be what lit the political fire in the belly of the young Aggie. During the next several years, he was, as he proudly boasted to us social service practitioners, privy to several other university name-change attempts, among them Texas Tech University.

This would all have been fine if the Senator had been addressing an Alumni Association or some other gathering with a passionate interest in the college-naming process. Such a theme, however, could not be further removed from the interest of social workers.

The senator opened the floor for questions, and the first was if he could explain why Texas ranks 49th in mental health spending. The senator did a political two-step around the question by saying that it’s because Texans don’t like to have their taxes raised. Not a profoundly thought-out response, by any measure, but a fairly typical political dodge.

However, the senator did educate us on a flaw in the way legislative sessions are handled that he says he has spent years trying to correct. Meeting every other year for 140-day sessions, the legislature attempts to pass several thousand bills before session’s end. The governor, however, wields unchecked power in the legislative process, because he or she waits until the legislators have returned home before exercising governor veto rights. The veto always stands unchallenged because only the governor can call a special session.

Senator Wentworth, to his credit, sees all of this as an unacceptable flaw in the system and has attempted over several sessions to correct it. However, the governor’s office and its lieutenants have worked just as tirelessly to kill any attempts at chipping away their power.

So Senator, thank you for trying to right a systemic political wrong, but shame on you for not knowing your audience and spending more time talking about how you and your colleagues can get around those “don’t-raise-my-taxes” constituents and exhibit leadership in developing ways to increase human services in Texas. The evident high-interest in how land-grant colleges go about changing their names among you and your colleagues is not acceptable to this Texas social worker nor doubtless to any of the others in your audience last Thursday.

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