

Mailing Address: P.O. Drawer 1200, Seminole, TX 79360 • Email: news@seminolesentinel.com • Web Site: www.seminolesentinel.com • Phone: (432) 758-3667 • Fax: (432) 758-2136



"HEY, LOOK, EVERYBODY... WE AVOIDED THE FISCAL CLIFF!"

State Capital Highlights

Compiled by Ed Sterling, Texas Press Association



140-day legislative session begins...

AUSTIN — The 83rd session of the Texas Legislature was called to order in the House and Senate on Jan. 8.

State Rep. Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, was elected speaker of the House, setting in motion his third consecutive term as leader of the chamber and his fifth two-year term as a state representative. State Rep. John Zerwas, R-Simonton, nominated Straus, and was followed with seconding speeches given by Reps. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs; Rene Oliveira, D-Brownsville; Patricia Harless, R-Spring; Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, and John Otto, R-Dayton.

After the vote, Straus administered the oath of office by Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson, and then he spoke. Straus acknowledged the change in composition of the body, calling it "the largest class of new members in 40 years." Forty-three of the 150 members of the House are freshmen, while 96 are Republicans and 54 are Democrats.

"Texas does not face a fiscal cliff, but we do face a demographic cliff," Straus said. "Our rapid growth requires a steadfast commitment to the core responsibilities of government, such as a quality education, a reliable water supply, a healthy transportation system, and an honest state budget."

"Our priorities should begin where our future does: in public education. More than 5 million children are enrolled in our public schools, which is more than the total population of 29 states. More than three million of them are deemed economically disadvantaged, and almost one million of them speak limited English. The education of all our

students will determine whether Texas is a land of prosperity or lost opportunities."

Last session, the Legislature cut more than \$5 billion from the education budget.

Meanwhile, in the East Wing of the Capitol, the Senate, presided over by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, convened. Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, was elected president pro tempore, chosen by her peers to step in and preside whenever the lieutenant governor is away. She served Texas as a House member from 1990 to 1999 and has been a member of the Senate since 1999.

Gov. Rick Perry addressed the body, focusing his comments on fiscal conservatism with a reminder that the Legislature pulled the state out of a multi-billion-dollar deficit last session.

"We chose the responsible path, the fiscally conservative path, and that path has led us here today," Perry said. "We sat down, separated our wants from our needs, prioritized, and tightened our belts, wherever necessary, and wherever possible. Far from the catastrophe many predicted for us at the time, that approach helped our economy improve more quickly, and more profoundly, than many had expected."

Then Perry cautioned the Senate not to look at the state's new, healthier, revenue estimate and be tempted to spend freely.

Combs estimates revenue
Here's what Gov. Perry was cautioning about, and what lawmakers are looking to as the potential fix for a lot of problems.

Texas Comptroller Susan Combs on Jan. 7 released the state's biennial revenue estimate, projecting \$101.4 billion available for general-purpose spending during the state's 2014-15 fiscal biennium.

"Texas experienced a very

strong rebound from a severe recession," Combs said in prepared remarks.

"The state's robust economic recovery led to better-than-expected revenue collections in major taxes such as the sales tax, oil and natural gas production taxes and motor vehicle sales taxes. The outlook for both the economy and state revenue is for continuing expansion as the fast-growth of the economic recovery gives way to moderate, sustained growth."

Combs said about \$3.6 billion would be set aside for future transfers to the \$8 billion Rainy Day Fund.

The Texas economy, in inflation-adjusted terms, is projected to increase by 3.4 percent in fiscal 2013, another 3.4 percent in fiscal 2014 and 3.9 percent in fiscal 2015. The state's unemployment rate, which reached 8.2 percent during the recession, is expected to continue slowly dropping and average 6 percent during 2015, Combs said.

Bills address water issues

State Rep. Allan Ritter, R-Nederland, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, on Jan. 10 filed H.B. 4 and H.B. 11, legislation "designed to help ensure Texas will meet its future water needs," he said. To pay for what the bills propose, "I would make a one-time allocation of \$2 billion from the state's Economic Stabilization Fund, often referred to as the Rainy Day Fund, to capitalize a new, dedicated revolving fund for use in financing water projects in the State Water Plan," Ritter said.

"It is vital for the future of Texas that a dedicated source of revenue be established for funding the State Water Plan," Ritter added. "Our economy depends on it, our communities depend on it, and ultimately, our daily

Paper 'n Ink...

good un's and bad un's

By Lynn Brisendine

Last I wrote about the best of movies I have seen over the last few months. "Lincoln" and "Les Miserables" were excellent, at least in my opinion. A couple of others I took in during the last few months also entertained and I think should have been included in the awards presentations which are now ongoing.

"Skyfall," the newest James Bond flick, was fun. It kept me guessing along with the plot and saw O07 prevail over a truly bad guy.

"The Dark Knight Rises" was another couple of hours well spent. The special effects alone made it a thriller.

Some other motion pictures, though, weren't received all that well by critics or fans. These movies too receive recognition, albeit, unwellcomed.

The Razzies is a compilation of the worst films to be screened over the last year. I can't agree or disagree with any picture on this list, as I have seen none of them.

They include "Battleship," "The Oofieloves in Big Balloon Adventure" (that one I did not only not see but it is the first time I have heard the title), "That's My Boy," "A Thousand Words," "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part II."

I suppose most of these titles were roundly panned when they entered theaters and I took the critics' word for it and didn't waste my money or my time on any of them.

I have a friend who questions any movie with a story that just can't be related to anything in the real world. He admits he "just doesn't get it." A lot of the movies on the Razzies list have that problem. This vampire battling werewolves just leaves me parroting my friend, "I just don't get it."

After trying to watch Adam Sandler in a few movies which have found their way to the movie channels has left me wondering just how anyone could find his stuff funny. Last year he made the Razzies with his dual role of playing a character and his sister. It was a bomb.

One movie which I didn't see make the dreadful list, which I caught a few minutes of one night last week, was the modern reincarnation of the Three Stooges. Growing up in the '50s and '60s, the Stooges were staple fare in reruns on many television channels. I am afraid that one of my "faults" is a love of good slapstick comedy. And the Stooges were some of the best.

This latest attempt at bringing back the trio's humor fell completely flat with this writer. I have to admit I only watched a few minutes of this rot when I decided something else had to be better.

Write Words...

By Dustin Wright
Sentinel Managing Editor

Art Linkletter's radio show "House Party" and television series, "Art Linkletter's House Party," which together aired mostly five days a week from 1945 to 1969, featured a popular segment entitled "Kids Say the Darndest Things."

It was revived briefly in 1998 through 2000 by CBS and comedian Bill Cosby.

The premise of the show is that Linkletter or Cosby would ask a question to a child (around the age of 3-8) who would usually respond in a only the way a child could.

My child, much like many others, always finds the darndest things to say.

In fact, he's been the comic relief in our household with some of his verbal responses, which I often times feel the urge to share with the masses via my Facebook page.

For instance, last week I had some dental work done and wasn't in the best of moods.

In trying to explain to him my situation in the best way I could to make his 3-year-old mind understand, he provided a great zinger.

Me: "Jeremy, dad's going to have to take some medicine."

Jeremy: "You eat your medicine, okay?"

Me: "Well, you can't exactly eat this medicine, you have to swallow it."

Jeremy: "No, you go home and you eat your medicine. Do you want a cookie?"

Play wrestling is a cherished past time in our home. It's not uncommon to find the two of us sprawled out on the hardwood floors of our three-bedroom home, having a headed showdown of physical wits.

A while back, during the summer, Jeremy was in the mood to practice his mixed-martial arts take downs (his rear naked chokes are brutal for a child his size), and he politely asked me: "Dad, I want to fight you, please?"

In laughter, I was proud of the fact that my son had asked me nicely to fight me, all the while, showing the "fighting" determination of a 3-year-old boy, complete with "dukes in the air."

Early this past fall, I was picking up Jeremy from his twice-weekly parent's day out school program. On the way through town, we made a stop at one of Seminole's red lights.

Being the ever observant child he is, he noticed a older model Lincoln Towncar pull up beside us.

Jeremy: "Dad, that's a grandma car right there."

Me (with a look of confusion on my face in trying to digest what he had just said): "Do what?"

Jeremy (pointing out his backseat, passenger window): "Right there, that car is a grandma car. See?"

I couldn't contain my laughter, once again, as he had already began the process of stereo-typing grandmothers and their cars.

Most recently, during Seminole's last snow event, my 3-year-old was bound and determined to have us stay home and play in the snow.

Jeremy: "Dad, I like the snow. I want to stay at Jeremy's house and play in the snow. I'll throw snow balls at you and you throw them at me and you fall down and I throw snow in your face. Okay? Say okay..."

Where he got up the imagination for me to fall into the snow and for him to throw snow in my face, I

am not quite sure, but it once again brought laughter to this dad's heart.

Probably the best zinger from his young mind came right before the Christmas holidays, as I had picked him up from my parents following an evening covering the Seminole Hospital District's Board of Directors meeting.

Jeremy: "Dad, where you been? Working at the office?"

Me: "No, I've been at a meeting."

Jeremy: "Where?"

Me: "At the hospital."

Jeremy: "You don't have any boo boos on your face. Did you get a shot?"

I laughed uncontrollably for a minute or two after I answered his question, only imagining the thought process going through his mind.

He must have really thought my meetings got violent enough for me to require bandages and a shot.

Oh to have the simple mind of a child once again and to be able to come up with and say the darndest things kids his age can say!

Have a blessed day!

ON YOUR PAYROLL

PRESIDENT

Barak Obama, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; (202) 456-1414

U.S. SENATE

Kay Bailey Hutchison, 284 Russell Senate Office Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20510-4304; (202) 224-5922; email: senator@hutchison.senate.gov

John Cornyn, 517 Hart Senate Office Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20510; (202) 224-2934

U.S. HOUSE District 19

Randy Neugebauer, 429 Cannon House Office Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20515 (202) 225-4005; email through website: http://www.house.gov/neugebauer

District Office: 611 University Ave., Suite 220, Lubbock, 79401; (806) 763-1611 or toll-free (888) 763-1611.

GOVERNOR

Rick Perry, Room 200, State Capitol, Austin, TX 78711 (512) 463-2000 or (800) 252-9600

Rep. Perry, Charles District 83
Capitol Address: Room E1.418, Capitol Extension P.O. Box 2910 Austin, TX 78768

(512) 463-0542 (512) 463-0671 Fax

District Address: 4216 102nd St. Suite 101 Lubbock, TX 79423 (806) 783-9934 (806) 783-9738 FAX

The Honorable Kel Seliger State Senator
P.O. Box 12068 Capitol Station Austin, Texas 78711 (512) 463-0131 (512) 475-3733 fax

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