

OPINIONS OF OTHER NEWSPAPERS

Higher ed must be top priority

As rising tuition threatens to put a college education out of the reach of the average Texan, lawmakers in Austin are debating whether to shortchange Texas Grants, one of the state's most successful education assistance programs. Such an action in a year of budget surpluses would betray the aspirations of Lone Star students and leave the state less competitive.

Texas is in the bottom third in per capita rates of college graduates, while facing increased demand for skilled workers. The last thing our leaders need to be doing is making higher education less accessible.

Since the program was launched in 2000, Texas Grants has provided tuition and fees for 161,000 students, more than half of them minorities. Anglos make up roughly a third of recipients; more than 13 percent are black.

The program has been especially effective in assisting Hispanic students, who received nearly half of the tuition grants over the past seven years. Their need for assistance will expand by the year 2040, when nearly 60 percent of the state's college age population is projected to be Hispanic.

Texas Grants provides a gateway for urban students to a variety of academic settings around the state. For instance, Texas Tech at Lubbock received \$1.14 million in initial grant allocations and more than \$8.6 million in renewals this fiscal year. That aid enabled more than 2,000 students to enroll.

State Sen. Rodney Ellis of Houston, who crafted the enabling legislation, says Texas Grants reaches only a fraction of the students who need the program. If fully funded at nearly \$900 million, the program would nearly triple the number of students receiving assistance to more than 180,000.

The House Appropriations Committee has approved \$454 million for the program, while the Senate Finance Committee has not yet voted on a bill that would earmark \$399 million. Ellis, who has introduced a bill to fully fund Texas Grants, is asking educators, parents and students to let lawmakers know about their support for increased college aid.

Funding is not the only issue that could diminish the program's effectiveness. To qualify for the grants, a student must prove residency, show financial need, be a Texas high school graduate and complete an advanced or recommended high school curriculum.

A plan offered by Texas Gov. Rick Perry would attach strings to the grants, requiring that they be converted to interest-free loans to be repaid if students fail to graduate within the specified span of their studies.

Ellis and other program supporters claim such strictures would have the effect of discouraging even more students from applying for the grants. As anyone who has worked his way through college knows, sometimes more than four years are needed to earn a degree, particularly if the student is working full time.

There is no higher priority for our legislators than making sure public higher education remains affordable to the public, particularly the children of low- and middle-income families. The continuing rise in costs to attend state universities, typified by Texas A&M University's recently announced intention to hike tuition and fees up to 13 percent, make this an issue on a par with property tax reduction.

With the money available, there's no excuse for failing to fund Texas Grants at a level that guarantees that every qualified student with the desire for education and the financial need gets the opportunity to attend college.

Need to give recognition

Melvin Sikes couldn't be in Washington, D.C., last week to receive the Congressional Gold Medal.

Sikes, 89, doesn't travel too

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

far from his home in Northwest Austin these days for health reasons. But when President Bush raised his right hand in sharp salute to the 300 Tuskegee Airmen who attended the Capitol ceremony Thursday, he was also saluting Sikes.

Sikes was among the nearly 1,000 black fighter and bomber pilots trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama between 1942 and 1946. We, too, salute the Tuskegee Airmen who distinguished themselves on and off the battlefield.

About 450 of the pilots who trained at Tuskegee flew combat missions. They defied racial stereotypes, flying 15,000 sorties and destroying more than 1,000 German aircraft. Tuskegee Airmen reportedly never lost a bomber from flights they escorted into enemy airspace. Those airmen courageously served a nation that rejected them.

Although the medal can't erase the indignities they endured because of their color, it can help heal lingering wounds of segregation, set the record straight and give them the honor they surely earned.

Sikes was trained as a bombardier, navigator and pilot, but never got the opportunity to use those skills in combat.

After graduating from North Carolina Central University, he joined the Army in 1943. He became a commissioned officer and earned his wings while stationed at Goodfellow Army Air Force base in San Angelo, where he trained on B-25s twin engine, medium-range bombers. As a bombardier-navigator he was sent to Walterboro, S.C., to await assignment in the Pacific. Those orders never came for him or other blacks trained as bombardiers, he said. When it was clear they wouldn't go overseas, Sikes tried another route to combat, requesting to be trained as a fighter pilot in the Tuskegee program.

He was accepted and trained on the PT13-B "an itty-bitty fighter plane," Sikes said and graduated to the AT-6, a larger plane, but never flew the big P-51 Mustang. Tuskegee units deployed overseas painted the tails of their Mustangs bright red, earning them the nickname "Red Tails."

Again, fate took its turn, denying Sikes a chance to fight. But he turned that determination to education, enrolling in the University of Chicago and earning a doctorate in education administration. Sikes went on to become dean of two historically black colleges, Wilberforce University in Ohio and Bishop College (now defunct) in Marshall.

Afterward, he worked as a clinical psychologist for the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Houston and as a professor at the University of Texas.

Sikes says his journey from Gary, Ind., where he was born, to Tuskegee's Air Field to the University of Chicago and to Texas is an American experience that has been both painful and joyous. It has been a journey of discovery "I spent many years researching why a client who was an alcoholic committed suicide after he got sober. He left a note, 'I couldn't stand the pain of sobriety.'"

"I discovered the meaning of that in my own life it's very difficult to be a black person in America. Now they want to say, 'Thank you, we are going to send a medal.' For many years, I've heard that. But I don't need it, though I appreciate it. I did my time. I served. I don't need a lot of recognition."

He might not need the recognition, but we need to give it to Melvin Sikes and those like him who were denied for so long the recognition they earned for defending a freedom that also was denied them for so long.

-- Austin American Statesman

CARTOON



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Privatization would hurt TSRR

The Texas State Railroad is a state park which operates steam engine trains between the East Texas towns of Rusk, in Cherokee County and Palestine, in Anderson County.

Last year over 70,000 riders rode the train which has been operated by the state for 31 years.

The future of the Texas State Railroad must really be a political hot potato, because it is difficult to get some politicians to commit to either side.

On one side, the Operating Agency group from Rusk and Palestine is for privatization.

On the other side is our group of Save Texas Parks, who represent those local folks and the people of the state of Texas, and are for continued state funding and operation of the railroad.

Public hearings have been scheduled for Senate Bill 1659 authored by Sen. Robert Nichols and House Bill 3113 authored by Rep. Byron Cook.

Both bills are identical and are related to the transfer of the Texas State Railroad to, and the creation of, the Texas State Railroad Authority.

This would lead to privatization of the Texas State Railroad.

The privatization bills definitely do not represent the interest of the people of Texas;

they give away the people's asset of \$130 million to an out-of-state company in eight years, along with \$12 million now.

The TSRR could be operated by the state, with improvements, for \$7.8 million; with after revenue, a net cost of only \$3.4 million over two years.

The legislature, our elected officials, does crazy things.

The fees to ride the train will double or triple with the private operator, making it difficult for the common Texan to afford the family recreational experience now furnished by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

There will be no more "kids ride free." It will no longer be a state park.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department will not make a static display out of the TSRR; the legislature may, but not the Department.

Executive Director Robert Cook told me last week, the Department loves the Texas State Railroad and wants to operate it as a state park.

And they have asked for the funds they way they ask for all park funds through their Legislative Appropriations Request.

If the TSRR is not funded, it is because our local elected officials do not have

enough swing to get the funding done.

But they could have enough swing to give the Railroad away.

It just does not make sense.

My State Representative, Chuck Hopson, does have the legislation to fund the railroad and does support state operation as a first option.

The operation of the Texas State Railroad is critical to our local economy.

It puts close to \$20 million into our local system every two years.

With the state, it is a sure thing.

With the out-of-state operator under contract, it is a risk; they have failed before.

The only public hearings for input before this is decided were in Austin.

It is imperative you contact your local elected officials by email, phone, fax or in person to express your opinion.

Your local newspaper will inform you of your elected officials' contact information.

This is the way our democratic system works.

If we do not vote and speak up, then we must accept the results.

Michael D. Banks
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Texas Press Association member 2007

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Bullard Banner News (USPS 015622) is published weekly Wednesdays at 114 N. Houston Street in Smith County, Bullard, Texas 75757. Postmaster, please send change of address to *Bullard Banner News*, 114 N. Houston Street, Bullard, Texas 75757. *Bullard Banner News* is mailed to subscribers, sold at newsstands and delivered by home-route carriers in Bullard, Lake Palestine East and surrounding areas. Periodicals Postage is paid at Bullard, Texas 75757, and other area post offices.

Yearly Subscription Rates
To Zip Code 75757 \$20
To all other Zip Codes \$.24