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School review to target DEI, books

Findings could help advance policy priorities of the GOP when legislators return to Austin

By Aarón Torres
STAFF WRITER

A state review intended to uncover wasteful spending in Texas public schools will also scrutinize diversity policies, foreign workers and library books, extending its reach into some of the most contentious issues in Texas politics.

Internal documents reviewed by Hearst Newspapers show that Comptroller Don Huffines' office plans to examine those subjects, along with school districts' spending on lobbyists, in four districts at the request of Gov. Greg Abbott.

The previously undisclosed details raise questions about the scope of the review and whether its findings could help advance Republican policy priorities when legislators return to Austin in January.

Huffines, a Republican, announced a financial audit of Austin, El Paso, Barbers Hill and Prosper ISDs earlier this month. The comptroller's office collects state taxes, estimates revenue and oversees state finances.

The review comes as Huffines seeks election to a full four-year term against Democratic state Sen. Sarah Eckhardt of Austin. Its findings are due Dec. 31, shortly before the 2027 legislative session begins. Abbott, a Republican, already has called for lawmakers to ban public school districts from hiring H-1B visa workers.

State Rep. Diego Bernal of San Antonio, the top Democrat on the House Public Education Committee, criticized the focus on issues beyond school spending and questioned why the comptroller was getting involved.

"How do the answers to any of

Review continues on A7

Elias Valverde II/Dallas Morning News

Comptroller Don Huffines' office plans to scrutinize diversity policies, foreign workers and library books at public schools, extending into some of the most contentious state political issues.

Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

Jester Estates in Northwest Austin, shown Nov. 7, 2025, faces increased wildfire risk because of limited access.

Sweeping plan to mitigate wildfire risk heads to vote

Steps outlined to prep homes, neighborhoods, responders over next 10 years

By Austin Sanders
STAFF WRITER

A sweeping plan to guard the Austin region from escalating wildfire risk over the next decade is up for a vote this week at Austin City Hall.

The Community Wildfire Protection Plan lays out 71 recommendations for reducing the danger, including clearing vegetation that can fuel fires, making homes less vulnerable to ignition and improving evacuation routes. But the plan includes no cost estimates for individual strategies and no funding to carry them out.

Austin City Council members got their first detailed look at the plan Tuesday, ahead of a planned vote Thursday.

At the briefing, Austin fire and disaster response officials said wildfire risk has increased over the past 25 years, with about 8,000 wildfire incidents since 1998. They emphasized that the danger is not limited to Austin's western edges, where development meets large stretches of wildland.

"When we have a wildland fire, it affects numerous other community resources such as communications infrastructure, power, water quality, and watershed stabilization," said Chris Graves, the city program manager who spearheaded the initiative.

The plan also calls for protecting watersheds, improving emergency response and coordination among city, county and regional fire agencies, and reviewing wildfire-related codes and development standards.

Graves said the plan could help the city and county pursue state and federal grants and define projects to harden structures, reduce vegetation and improve public awareness and evacuation preparedness. More detailed funding decisions would come as officials develop those projects.

Council Member Chito Vela raised concerns Tuesday about whether some rec-

Wildfires continues on A2

Senate rivals sharpen messages

By Casey Murray and John C. Moritz
STAFF WRITERS

The state's nailbiter U.S. Senate race has officially hit the final dash with Democrat James Talarico painting the world's richest person as the poster child for political self-dealing and Republican Ken Paxton doubling down on the culture-war issues that have helped keep his party in power in Texas for decades.

Both Paxton and Talarico are criss-crossing the state amid early voting, delivering contrasting closing messages with the same styles that have marked the race since each nailed down his party's nomination months ago.

Talarico's closing argument takes aim at Elon Musk, the trillionaire founder of Space X and Tesla who has pumped a stag-

Senate continues on A2

Recent poll: Dems' faith in election results falls

By Ali Swenson and Linley Sanders
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Daemien Williams used to trust U.S. election results, but not anymore.

The 50-year-old Democrat in Centreville, Ill., worries that President Donald Trump and other Republicans will try anything from intimidating voters to seizing ballots to hold onto power in November's midterm elections — and, in the process, jeopardize the outcome.

"I don't put anything past these people," he said. "My trust level is at its all-time low."

Elections continues on A7

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