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Executive director's legislative update

By Bryan Collier

The regular session of the 85th Texas Legislature concluded on May 29. While Governor Abbot has announced that there will be a special session later this summer to address a number of policy issues, it appears the 85th Legislature has concluded their work on matters related to criminal justice and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

With few exceptions, appropriations to TDCJ for the next two fiscal years will remain at the current FY 2016-17 appropriated levels. Since the appropriation process began with state agencies having to submit an initial budget proposal showing the impact of a 4 percent reduction, maintaining current funding is a very positive outcome.

The most notable exception to continued FY 2016-17 funding levels involves a reduction associated with declining offender populations. Four TDCJ correctional facilities will close this summer, to include the Ware Unit in Colorado City and three privately-

operated facilities: the Bartlett State Jail, West Texas Intermediate Sanction Facility and Bridgeport Pre-Parole Transfer Facility. This budget reduction should not be viewed negatively, as it is the result of the state's successful investment in, and the agency's successful implementation of, diversion and treatment programs.

In conjunction with these unit closures, the Rudd Unit in Brownfield will be repurposed to serve as an Intermediate Sanction Facility for parole violators.

The agency is working to help Ware Unit staff transfer to the neighboring Wallace Unit and other nearby facilities, and every Ware Unit employee has been offered another position within TDCJ. The agency is also recruiting displaced private sector employees to help fill existing vacancies.

As to employee benefits, legislators continued funding the state's share of health care costs and also maintained the state's current

contribution rates for employee pensions. These decisions, along with the passage of the Employees Retirement System's Sunset bill, were positive developments for all state employees.

In regards to other legislation, several bills were enacted that will have a positive impact. Examples include statutory changes that will: make it a misdemeanor offense to fly drones over correctional facilities at a height of less than 400 feet, facilitate parolee reporting to parole offices or other authorized locations that may require travel through a child safety zone, and transfer responsibility for paying insurance contributions for Community Supervision and Corrections Department employees from TDCJ to ERS.

In summary, a legislative session which began amid concerns about significant budget reductions ended with adequate funding and some beneficial amendments to state law. While the agency did not get all the funding requested for certain items

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such as renovation and repair of existing facilities or offender healthcare, we received sufficient funding to fulfill our vital mission. I want to thank Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, Speaker Straus and all the members of the 85th Texas Legislature for their support of the agency and our employees.

During the summer this agency will work diligently to implement the funding and policy decisions made by the 85th Texas Leg-

islature. To the extent any issues addressed during the upcoming special session impact TDCJ or our workforce, we will continue to keep you advised through this newsletter and the agency website.

As always, thank you once again for your efforts on behalf of all Texans. Having met with many policymakers throughout the legislative session, I can assure you your efforts are appreciated in the state capitol. ●