

The top 6 priorities for rural Texas

The Hill Country Democratic Coalition (HCDC) comprises a group of Democratic party chairs from the 12 counties in the Hill Country (Kendall, Burnet, Gillespie, Kerr, Hays, Comal, Real, McCulloch, Bandera, Mason, Lampasas, Llano and Blanco). We work closely together to advance the priorities that are important to rural Texans, regardless of party. Many thanks to the HCDC for allowing me to share these priorities, which include the following issues:

- Protecting our public schools, the backbone of rural communities.

We believe that vouchers and charter schools are not viable alternatives to public schools in rural Texas. In the session of the Texas Legislature just concluded on May 31, voucher programs failed to gain any traction. We also support measures that increase the authority of rural communities to determine how schools are funded and managed. The state finally released \$11.2 billion of federal COVID funds (out of a total of \$18 billion allocated) to school districts after pressure from education advocates and Democratic lawmakers.

- Enabling rural residents to fully participate in the success of the Texas economy.

We believe a living wage for all Texans is a requirement to participate in that success. In addition, the scarcity of affordable housing in rural Texas contributes to the migration of residents from rural to urban areas. We also advocate for infrastructure investments to improve rural roadways and the expansion of rural public transportation programs to increase their availability to aged and poor rural Texans.

- Securing our future by addressing economic and educational issues



faced by young rural Texans.

We must address the crisis of student debt, the excessive costs of higher education and lack of technical training that is causing young Texans to leave rural areas. We also advocate for the expansion of broadband internet in rural areas so that students and all rural Texans can participate in the new economy.

Unfortunately, a bill to expand rural broadband access – one of Gov. Abbott’s “emergency items” declared prior to the start of the legislature – failed to make it out of committee, despite widespread bipartisan support.

- Increasing and enhancing the delivery of healthcare (including women’s healthcare) in rural areas, including the expansion of Medicaid to obtain the full benefit of the federal taxes that are paid by Texans.

Unfortunately, the Texas House voted down a budget amendment for such an expansion. In addition, a shortage of doctors and closing hospitals has created a crisis in some rural areas. We believe a differential fee for rural medical providers and other innovations are needed to attract healthcare providers.

- Addressing rural environmental and property issues that impact all Texans.

Water resources are under attack and require increased state and local controls. Practices such as aggregate mining, oil and gas production, improper irrigation practices and

purchase of water rights for commercial purposes threaten the water supply of millions. Unfortunately, a bill to allow Kendall County (and surrounding counties) more authority to regulate development, House Bill 3883, failed to advance out of committee. (See my column in Progressive Views on March 12.)

We also believe in reasonable guidelines and restrictions on the uses of eminent domain that today favor commercial operations over private property rights. We encourage our elected officials to address climate change, since many rural Texans depend on the land to earn a living and we want to see those resources protected for future generations.

- Proclaiming and protecting our values including the right to vote of all citizens and naturalized citizens.

We continue to identify and fight voter suppression efforts. We advocate for same-day and online voter registration, which particularly helps to boost voter participation in geographic areas with long distances to government services.

Gov. Abbott will no doubt call at least one special session of the Texas Legislature to address redistricting and other legislation not passed during the regular session. Per the Texas Constitution, the special session can only address the issues specified by Gov. Abbott and not introduce any other legislation.

The Kendall County Democratic Party encourages you to contact Rep. Kyle Biedermann and Sen. Donna Campbell to express your opinion on the bills under consideration once the session and its tasks are announced.

For more information on how you can get involved, visit www.kcdems.us.

Laura Bray is the chair of the Kendall County Democratic Party.