

Perry proposes privatizing lottery to fund health care

Governor wants to increase trooper time on highways without new hires

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AUSTIN - Gov. Rick Perry today proposed that the state sell the Texas Lottery to private interests and use the money to establish endowment funds for health care, cancer research and public education.

In his State of the State address, the governor also outlined a "Healthier Texas" initiative that, he said, would use hundreds of millions of federal dollars to create a funding pool to help low-income, working Texans purchase health insurance.

"The financial cost would be modest, the social benefit extraordinary," he said. "That's because this plan recognizes the long-term benefits of providing Texans preventative care through insurance instead of paying for costly emergency room visits.

The governor also defended his recent executive order, which has sparked much protest from conservative lawmakers, that sixth-grade girls be inoculated against a sexually transmitted virus linked to cervical cancer. "I refuse to look a young woman in the eye 10 years from now who suffers from this form of cancer and tell her we could have stopped it, but we didn't," he said.

On other topics, Perry's office released a proposed budget calling for the construction of two new prisons and the conversion of a youth facility into another adult lockup. And the governor proposed a sweeping reorganization of the Department of Public Safety.

Perry estimated that the sale of the lottery to a private company would raise at least \$14 billion for state government.

He proposed that \$2.7 billion of that be used to create a health endowment for the uninsured that could generate about \$250 million in interest payments each year.

Another \$3 billion, he said, could create a cancer research trust fund and more than \$8 billion could be dedicated to a public education endowment.

"If we act now, we can invest in our classrooms, laboratories and hospitals, giving hope to those who need it most," he said.

The governor called for \$1.7 billion in new funding for higher education and adding \$360 million for student financial aid.

He also urged the Legislature to use dedicated funds for parks and other designated programs for their intended purposes. At present, hundreds of millions of dollars in dedicated funds are being diverted for other uses.

The proposed changes to the DPS call for transferring driver's license offices from the DPS to the Texas Department of Transportation and consolidating the police agency's four investigative divisions and putting them under control of the Texas Rangers.

The plan would transfer 219 commissioned officers from driver's license facilities to the highway patrol and convert 82 management positions in the criminal divisions into troopers or field investigators.

“It is the governor's vision to redirect the primary state law enforcement organization to better adapt to the threats that Texas faces today, to streamline DPS, to make it more nimble and more lethal to those who would seek to do Texans harm,” Perry spokesman Robert Black said.

He said the governor also wants to “strike a balance between increasing rehabilitation and also increasing (prison) capacity for future needs.”

In his budgetary recommendations, which he will release today, Perry will propose an increase of \$14.4 million for drug treatment and other rehabilitation programs for offenders.

Two medium security prisons of 1,000 beds each and the retrofitting of 600 additional beds in a Texas Youth Commission facility to be transferred to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice would cost \$125.8 million from bonds remaining from a package approved by Texas voters in 2001.

The governor also will recommend spending \$34.4 million over the next two years to allow the criminal justice agency to acquire additional prison space from counties.

Texas hasn't built any new prisons since the early 1990s, when it completed a \$3 billion expansion program prompted by a federal court order to end overcrowding and make other, extensive improvements.

Texas prisons are full again, but some legislators prefer to spend more money on rehabilitation programs, such as drug and alcohol treatment, rather than build new lockups.

The Department of Public Safety hasn't been restructured to any significant extent since 1957, according to a member of the governor's staff who didn't want to be identified.

Texas is one of only six states in which driver's license functions are part of the police force. Under Perry's plan, civilian employees would be transferred to the Department of Transportation while the commissioned officers would beef up the highway patrol.

An officer's standard work day also would be lengthened from eight to nine hours, and a trooper would be paid overtime for the additional hour, or about \$9,000 more a year.

The goal is to increase troopers' time on the highways without hiring additional officers. The highway patrol now has more than 2,400 troopers.

At present, the DPS has four separate investigatory divisions the Texas Rangers, the criminal law enforcement division, motor vehicle theft and criminal intelligence with separate chains of command that make coordination difficult, the governor's aide said.

Putting all the divisions under the Texas Rangers and streamlining management would make the state police force more able to deal with the terrorism threat and sophisticated criminal operations, including drug smuggling.

“You need to be very flexible and intelligence-driven,” he said, adding that at least 82 management positions in the separate divisions have been identified as unnecessary.

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