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Cliff-hanger on school funding

Gov. Mike Dunleavy will decide late today, May 19, on a possible veto of HB 57, which has school legislation and funding. He could also allow it to become law without his signature. If a veto comes down, the Legislature will move for a veto override in joint-session on Tuesday. An override will require 40 “yes” votes of the 60 House and Senate members. Even if the veto is overridden the governor may veto or reduce funds for a higher Base Student Allocation, or BSA, when he signs the FY 2026 budget, likely in late June. Overriding that will take 45 vote but it will also come after the Legislature has left Juneau. Lawmakers could convene a special session for the budget veto override but that’s considered unlikely. It would most likely come in January, which will leave school districts stuck with current-year funding. Besides a \$700 increase in the BSA (currently at \$5,960 per student) HB 57 has additional funds for pupil transportation (school busing), authority for school officials to restrict students’ use of cell phones in schools, reading incentive grants and money for career and technical education, or CTE.

The reading and CTE money is linked to enactment of SB 113, a tax on digital businesses, with revenues that would be allocated to the two education programs. The governor may also veto this bill. SB 113 has not yet been formally transmitted to the governor, so a veto would come after the Legislature adjourns May 21.

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Pension reform, after passing House, now positioned for 2026

An important bill now positioned for the 2026 session is HB 78, providing a defined benefit (traditional) pension option for public employees in addition to the current defined contribution, or 401(k)-type retirement savings. The bill passed the House 21-19 on May 12 on a partisan lineup and is now in the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee. It will be dealt with next year, said Sen. Cathy Giessel, R-Anch., sponsor of the Senate version, SB 28, which is also in Labor and Commerce. The new pension option would aid in recruitment and retention, a critical need. *The state has spent \$700 million in the last six years in bonuses in hiring and retaining existing staff, Giessel said in a briefing last week. “This is the cost of doing nothing,” about pension reform, she said.*

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. . . Education/Energy . . .

HB 39: Education for deaf and hard of hearing

House leaders pulled this bill off the floor last week and returned it to the Rules committee. A whiff of politics here? The sponsor is Rep. Jamie Allard, R-Eagle River, an outspoken member of the Republican House Minority. A Senate version sponsored by Sen. Elvi Gray-Jackson, D-Anch., SB 8, is in the Senate Finance Committee. Democrats in the House Majority coalition may want Gray Jackson's bill to move and not Allard's. House Bill 39 is more prescriptive than the Senate version, however, and may be more expensive. It establishes that children who are deaf or hard of hearing have rights to individualized education program that identifies their primary language, considers their prognosis for hearing loss, provides instruction in their primary language and assistive devices, services, and assessments in their primary language. Seventeen states have passed a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children's Bill of Rights.

International teachers: Successful program for rural schools now in peril?

Rural school districts are worried about significant delays in the processing of J-1 and H-1B visa applications by federal immigration officials for international teachers they have recruited. HJR 25, by Rep. Genevieve Mina, D-Anch., is moving fast through the Legislature. It asks the state congressional delegation to lend a hand with the Trump administration. The resolution was introduced May 9, passed out of the House Education Committee May 12, approved in the House 40-0 on May 13, and is now out of the Senate Education Committee and on the Senate calendar for final passage today, May 19.

Highly-qualified international teachers now fill about 60% of teaching staff in some rural Alaska school districts in western Alaska, Kodiak and the North Slope, reducing the uncertainties of high turnover in rural schools. In 2020 and 2021 the small Kuspuk School District in the mid-Kuskokwim River region saw a 53% turnover in staff. Delays with the visas could imperil districts' work in staffing up for the 2025-2026 school season. Resolutions don't have the force of law but they are important in giving support for efforts by the state's delegation in Washington, D.C. "Many of our international hires, particularly those from the Philippines, have shown remarkable resilience, cultural adaptability, and a deep commitment to life in some of the most remote and logistically complex parts of Alaska," Kuspuk school superintendent Madeline Aguillard told the House Education Committee May 12.

"Open enrollment": Governor pushing this at behest of Koch Brothers?

The governor's continued push for statewide "open enrollment" is puzzling to legislators. He cites this as one reason for a possible veto of HB 57. "We have open enrollment now within school districts," says Sen. Bill Wielchowski, D-Anch. "By opening this statewide (i.e. between districts) it threatens to crowd children out in local districts under a first-come, first-served enrollment," Wielchowski said in a briefing last week by Senate leaders. "No one is asking for this." No one in Alaska, that is. The governor seems to be responding to a nation-wide campaign by the conservative Koch Brothers, but open enrollment isn't practical in Alaska. The governor's other request is for money for reading incentive grants.

. . . Health Care . . .

Health insurance prior-authorization, SB 133, poised for final passage

This bill, a priority for health care providers, has passed the Senate and is on the House calendar for today, May 19. It sets timetables for insurers to authorize payment for medical procedures and also requires more electronic processing in lieu of paper. Health providers complain that delays in authorizations for care endanger patients and adds to administrative costs. Provider groups worked with insurers last year to develop a consensus in support of the legislation.

Pharmacy Benefit Managers: SB 134 in House Rules Committee, set for passage

This bill passed the Senate and is now in the House Rules Committee and is likely to pass by Wednesday night. It corrects an oversight in last year's HB 226 which required Pharmacy Benefit Managers, or PBMs, to register with the state Division of Insurance but not be licensed, which adds a layer of oversight. SB 134 is sponsored by Sen. Cathy Giessel, R-Anch. PBMs manage procurement of pharmaceuticals for health plans and other entities and have been accused of excess profit-taking. A more comprehensive bill is SB 142, which expands state regulation of PBMs to those serving municipal and state group health insurance plans and policies, including self-insured plans and policies. Last year's HB 226 was more limited. The bill, also sponsored by Giessel, is in the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee.

Its 2026 for SB 121, SB 122: Hot-button issues for health providers, insurance companies

These bills, also by Sen. Giessel, are strongly supported by health providers and just as strongly opposed by health insurers. SB 121 sets out a framework for minimum payments for treatments by insurers, who have been accused of low-balling reimbursements; SB 122 would set standards for networks established by insurers for providers under contracts for care and payment. Insurers have been accused of setting up "narrow" networks that include only a limited number of provider. SB 122 would require larger networks to include more providers, giving patients more choice. Both bills are in the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee. Hearings were held, mainly on SB 121, but both measures are now held for the 2026 session.

SB 96, SB 95: Child care tax credits, framework, pass House. Governor's desk next stop

The House passed SB 96 last Friday, May 16, on a 33-5 vote following Senate approval 18-1 on May 5. The bill allows tax credits for businesses supporting child care facilities and making contributions to nonprofits offering child care. There will be an indirect fiscal impact in terms of reduced revenues from various business taxes but the effect won't be seen immediately. The support of Rep. Julie Coulombe, R-Anch., in the House will likely help avoid a veto by the governor, who is very concerned about any legislation that adds costs this year. SB 95, also dealing with child care, sets up the framework for grants and tax credits and basically reaffirms HB 89, which was passed last year but has encountered legal questions. SB 95 passed the House 27-12 on May 17 after passing the Senate 16-3 on May 5.

... Status of Bills ...

Introduced in the House

-- SB 24: Raise minimum age for tobacco, nicotine, electronic smoking products (By FIN).....To FIN
 -- SB 26: Eliminate daylight savings time (By Merrick)To SA, FIN
 -- SB 64: Relating to elections (By FIN)To FIN
 -- SB 133: Prior authorizations for medical care covered by health insurers (By L&C)To L&C, FIN
 -- SB: 134: Pharmacy benefits managers (By Giessell).....To HSS, L&C
 -- HB 227: Museums: Notice to acquire property (By Story)To CRA, SA
 -- SB 6: Education in history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (By EDU)To EDU, FIN

House Committees' Actions

-- HB 191: Invasive Special Council in ADF&G (5 do pass, 1 no rec, 3 amend)RES to FIN
 -- HB 110: Social work licensure compact (6 do pass).....L&C to FIN
 -- HB 138: Behavioral health crisis services surcharge and fund (4 do pass, 2 do not pass)L&C to FIN
 -- HB 156: Disclosure of wage information (4 do pass, 2 do not pass).....L&C to RLS
 -- HB 24: Aggravating factors considered at sentencing (4 do pass, 2 do not pass, 1 amend)SA to JUD
 -- HB 43: Elections, voting, ballots (3 do pass, 3 do not pass, 1 amend)SA to FIN
 -- HB 126: Reinstatement of Native corporations (5 do pass).....CRA To RLS
 -- HB 207: Fire station grant program (4 do pass, 1 do not pass)CRA to FIN
 -- SB 95: Child care assistance program; child care grant program (6 do pass, 4 no rec)FIN to RLS
 -- SB 97: Big game permit program (6 do pass, 4 no rec).....FIN to RLS
 -- HB 158: Professional licensing; temporary permits (2 do pass, 2 no rec)MLV to L&C
 -- HB 11: Contributions and donations from PFD (3 do pass, 2 no rec, 1 amend)SA to FIN
 -- HB 28: Student loan repayment pilot program (2 do pass, 2 do not pass, 2 no rec, 4 amend)FIN to RLS
 -- HB 105: Mental health education (5 do pass, 1 do not pass, 4 no rec)FIN to RLS
 -- HB 148: Relating to insurance (2 do pass, 5 amend).....L&C to FIN
 -- HB 174: REAAs and small municipal school district fund; Mt. Edgecumbe (6 do pass, 3 no rec)FIN to CAL
 -- HB 184: AIDEA: workforce housing development projects (3 do pass, 1 no rec, 1 amend)CRA to L&C
 -- SB 29: Executive administrator for the Big Game Commercial Services Board (5 do pass, 2 no rec)RES to FIN
 -- SB 96: Child care: tax credits (3 do pass, 1 do not pass, 5 no rec)FIN to RLS
 -- SB 133: Prior authorizations for medical care covered by health insurers (6 do pass)L&C to FIN
 -- SB: 134: Pharmacy benefits managers (4 do pass, 1 no rec)HSS to L&C
 -- SB 137: Extend Boards of Certified Direct-Entry Midwives, Nursing, Veterinary Examiners, and Parole (6 do pass)L&C to FIN

House Floor Actions

-- HB 123: Vehicle rental taxes; issuance of subpoenas related to tax recordsPASSED 38-2
 -- HB 13: Municipal property tax exemptions.....PASSED 25-15
 -- HB 78: PERS/TRS employer pension contributionPASSED 21-19
 -- HB 173: Occupational therapy assistant licensurePASSED 40-0
 -- SB 183: Powers of the Legislative Budget and Audit and audit divisionPASSED 30-10 (on a reconsideration vote)
 -- HB 33: Conflict of interest: Board of Fisheries and Board of GamePASSED 28-12
 -- SB 57: Appropriations for capital/ budgetPASSED 21-19
 -- HB 14: Repeal catastrophic illness assistance and medical assistancePASSED 40-0
 -- HB 73: Complex care residential homesPASSED 40-0
 -- HB 62: Sexual assault examination kits and tracking systemPASSED 39-0
 -- SB 97: Big game permit programPASSED 39-0
 -- HB 23: Definition of "employer" for purposes of State Commission on Human RightsPASSED 39-0
 -- SB 50: Comprehensive plans of first- and second -class boroughsPASSED 22-17
 -- SB 80: Extend boards, Big Game Commercial Services, Massage Therapists, Marijuana ControlPASSED 39-0 (reconsideration notice given)
 -- SB 96: Child care: tax creditsPASSED 35-5 (on a reconsideration vote)

Status current as of Friday, May 16

Committee abbreviations:

RLS	Rules
FIN	Finance
RES	Resources
L&C	Labor and Commerce
JUD	Judiciary
HSS	Health and Social Services
EDU	Education
ARCTIC	Special Committee on Arctic
TRB	Special Committee, Tribal Affairs
CRA	Community and Regional Affairs
ENE	Energy

What committee reports mean

When a committee reports a bill out (see Committees' Actions) members sign on their recommendations. Many sign "do pass," indicating they support the bill. If they oppose the bill, they will sign "do not pass." They can recommend "amend," to indicate a desire for changes. Many simply sign "no recommendation," meaning they neither support or oppose the bill. Legislators must take a position when they vote on the floor, pushing a button for a green light (approval) or a red light (disapproval).

... Status of Bills ...

Introduced in the Senate

- HB 194: Approve Marathon Petroleum royalty oil sale (By GOV)
.....To FIN
- SB 192: Evacuation designation levels; Alaska Disaster Act (By Bjorkman)
.....To CRA, RES
- HB 13: Municipal property tax exemptions (By CRA)
.....To CRA, SA
- HB 78: PERS/TRS employer pension contribution (By FIN)
.....To L&C, FIN
- HB 123: Vehicle rental taxes; issuance of subpoenas related to tax records (By FIN)
.....To FIN
- HB 173: Occupational therapy assistant licensure (By L&C)
.....To FIN
- SB 193: Practice of naturopathy (By SA)
.....To HSS, FIN
- HB 33: Conflict of interest: Board of Fisheries and Board of Game (By Stutes)
.....To CRA, RES
- SB 194: Tax on mobile sports wagering (By Cronk)
.....To L&C, FIN
- HB 14: Repeal catastrophic illness assistance and medical assistance (By Stapp)
.....To HSS, FIN
- HB 73: Complex care residential homes (By FIN)
.....To FIN
- SB 195: Low onset disasters; Alaska Disaster Act (By SA).....
.....To SA, FIN

Senate Committees' Actions

- SB 6: Education in history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (2 do pass, 4 no rec)
.....FIN to RLS
- SB 117: State Commission for Human Rights (1 do pass, 3 no rec)
.....L&C to FIN
- SB 146: REAAs; small municipal school district fund; teacher housing (5 do pass, 2 no rec)
.....FIN to RLS
- SB 147: Pharmacist prescription authority (1 do pass, 3 no rec)
.....L&C to FIN
- SB 151: Head lice and conjunctivitis in public schools (5 do pass)
.....EDU to FIN
- SB 158: Administrative areas commercial set net entry permits (2 do pass, 2 no rec)
.....L&C to RES
- SB 181: Employment information disclosure (2 do pass, 3 no rec)
.....EDU to L&C
- SB 184: School bond debt reimbursement (6 do pass, 1 amend)
.....FIN to RLS
- HB 75: Permanent Fund; employment; eligibility (1 do pass, 4 no rec) ..
.....SA to RLS
- SB 9: Surrender of infants (1 do pass, 3 no rec)
.....JUD to RLS
- SB 136: Privacy of firearm transactions (3 do pass, 1 no rec, 1 amend) ..
.....L&C to JUD
- SB 167: Criminal conviction overturned: receive PFD (4 do pass)
.....JUD to RLS
- SB 172: Occupational therapy licensure compact (1 do pass, 4 no rec) ...
.....L&C to FIN
- HB 116: Commercial fishing insurance cooperative (3 do pass, 2 no rec)
.....L&C to RLS
- SB 140: Fire station grant program (4 do pass, 1 no rec)
.....CRA to FIN
- HB 16: Campaign finance, contribution limits (3 do pass, 4 amend)
.....FIN to RLS

Senate Committees' Actions

- HB 31: Registration of commercial vessels (7 do pass)
.....FIN to RLS
- HB 36: Foster children psychiatric treatment (3 do pass, 2 no rec)
.....HSS to FIN
- HB 50: Snow classics (5 do pass).....
.....CRA to L&C
- HB 79: Vic Fischer Shoup Bay State Marine Park (5 do pass)
.....CRA to RES
- SB 132: Relating to insurance (7 do pass)
.....FIN to CAL
- SB 156: Alaska Commercial Fishing and Agriculture Bank; loans (3 do pass, 4 no rec)
.....FIN to CAL
- SB 159: Increase contributions to training employment program (1 do pass, 3 no rec).....
.....L&C to FIN
- SB 160: Membership: legislative council and Legislative Budget and Audit Committee (3 do pass, 1 no rec)
.....SA to FIN
- SB 185: Insurance: rebates; advertising (1 do pass, 2 no rec, 1 amend) ..
.....CRA to L&C
- HB 35: Use and possession of electronic devices by prisoners (3 do pass, 1 no rec).....
.....JUD to RLS
- HB 36: Foster children psychiatric treatment (3 do pass, 1 amend)
.....JUD to FIN
- HB 58: Office of public advocacy (2 do pass, 2 no rec).....
.....CRA to JUD
- HB 70: Emergency medical services for operational canines (4 do pass)
.....HSS to L&C
- HB 123: Vehicle rental taxes; issuance of subpoenas related to tax records (7 do pass)
.....FIN to RLS

Senate Floor Actions

- SB 24: Raise minimum age for tobacco, nicotine, electronic smoking products
.....PASSED 15-5
- SB 26: Eliminate daylight savings time
.....PASSED 18-2
- SB 64: Relating to elections
.....PASSED 14-6
- SB 133: Prior authorizations for medical care covered by health insurers
.....PASSED 19-0
- SB: 134: Pharmacy benefits managers
.....PASSED 20-0
- SB 6: Education in history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders
.....PASSED 20-0
- HB 75: Permanent Fund; employment; eligibility
.....PASSED 20-0
- HB 116: Commercial fishing insurance cooperative
.....PASSED 20-0

Dustup over audit information to Legislature

This hasn't gotten a lot of public attention but a dispute has developed between the Department of Revenue and the Legislature's Budget and Audit Committee over information on oil and gas taxpayer audits reviewed by legislative auditors. The result is SB 183, which whizzed through the Senate, passing 19-0 on May 5, and through the House 30-10 on May 12. The bill is now headed to the governor. SB 183 requires agencies to provide data in a format legislative auditors can use. The department says this imposes a serious additional workload and sets a poor precedent.

. . . Resources . . .

HB 119, on Fairbanks gas line spur, gets mixed recommendations in House committee

HB 119 would require the state's Alaska Gasline Development Corp. to integrate a lateral spur to Fairbanks from the planned Alaska LNG Project pipeline route west of Fairbanks into the larger project so Fairbanks consumers aren't stuck with the cost of the lateral. The House State Affairs Committee has sent HB 119 on to the Resources committee May 7 with split recommendations, which may doom the bill. Two House Majority members, Reps. Ashley Carrick, D-Fairbanks (the bill sponsor), and Kye Holland, D-Anch., voted "do pass," while three Minority members, Reps. Vance, R-Homer; Kevin McCabe, R-Big Lake, and Elexie Moore, R-Wasilla, recommended "amend" as did two other House Majority members, Reps. Rebecca Himschoot, I-Sitka, and Andi Story, D-Juneau. Also, Rep. Bill Elam, R-Nikiski, removed his name as a cosponsor. This issue has become red-hot for the Interior delegation, who felt they were promised this years ago by AGDC. If consumers bear the entire cost of the lateral pipeline it would substantially raise the cost of gas delivered to Fairbanks. *It's unclear if this change can be made under the current federal license for Alaska LNG or whether the license will have to be amended.*

Tanana State Forest could grow to 2.4 million acres: HB 218, SB 188

The governor's HB 218 and SB 188 came in too late for legislative action this year but are ready to be worked on in the House and Senate State Affairs committees next year. If passed, the legislation would add 574,450 acres to the Tanana Valley State Forest in Interior Alaska to bring the forest to a total of about 2.4 million acres. The Tanana forest now stretches in separate parcels from the Kantishna River west of Nenana to the Tok area east of Fairbanks. The proposed additions, which would add lands to the state forest in multiple areas, have been recommended in several Interior regional land plans done in recent years. State forests are open for timber sales and other uses. "This change provides certainty for investors that investments in reforestation, road construction and other activities will be safeguarded and maintained," the governor said in his letter of transmittal to the Legislature. There is a lot of low-value black spruce in the Interior but for the state forest additions the state Department of Natural Resources is working to include productive forest lands with higher-value timber like white spruce and birch.

DNR is also working on long-range plans for a Susitna state forest.

This is part of a plan by the governor and state natural resources Commissioner John Boyle to expand the state's small timber industry. Much of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough is state lands managed by the state Division of Lands and Water Management but creating a new state forest under the Division of Forestry puts the focus on more active management of the region's forest resource, although other uses like recreation would be allowed. The boundaries and size of the new forest are still being worked out. Legislation will be required, also. *Two other governor's initiatives on forest development will wait until next year. They are HB 72 and SB 67, allowing for long-term leases in state forests for harvesting.* Both were introduced in January but are still in the House and Senate Resources committees. The Senate Resources committee held one hearing on SB 67, on Feb. 7. One hearing was held in House Resources on Feb. 21.

. . . Business/Health Care . . .

Insurance prior authorization, SB 133, passes House

This high priority bill passed the House Sunday, May 18, after passing the Senate earlier. It sets deadlines for insurance companies to approve authorization of coverage for medical procedures. Delays in authorizations have been a real problem for health care providers as well as patients seeking treatments.

HB 158, SB 145: Professional licensing mobility

This legislation introduced March 26 by the governor seems to be introduced every year but never goes anywhere. The bills allow for recognition of professional licenses in good standing from other states. This year the House version went to the Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, which focused on licensing for military spouses, which is already provided for in existing law. HB 58 finally moved on May 14 to the House Labor and Commerce Committee. The Senate version is still in the Senate State Affairs. Given the shortage of professionals and labor in general one would think there would be more of a push behind the legislation. In the past, the various state professional licensing boards have dragged their feet on reciprocal licensing mainly to protect their turf from competition.

SB 39: Payday loans, under \$25,000

This bill has come near to passage over several years. The version this year, by Sen. Forrest Dunbar, D-Anch., is in House Finance Committee along with the House version, HB 132 by Rep. Ted Eisheid, D-Anch. The legislation deals with allegations of abuse by lenders making small loans at high interest rates typically to low-income borrowers.

HB 133: Payments on contracts

The House State Affairs Committee heard this bill, by Rep. Rebecca Himschoot, I-Sitka, on Saturday, May 17. The bill requires the state to make payment on contracts with nonprofits, municipalities and tribes within 30 days similar to other state contracts, such as for construction. The Senate version, by Sen. Scott Kawasaki, D-Fairbanks, is in the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee.

HB 193: Parental leave

This bill, by Rep. Carolyn Hall, D-Anch. sets up a payroll tax-type mechanism for wage and salary employees similar the existing Unemployment Insurance Compensation payroll tax. The idea is to help pay for parental leave for child care. It is in the House Finance Committee.

HB 184: AIDEA workforce housing, by Story, in House Labor and Commerce

This legislation reinforces the ability of the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority to finance multi-dwelling housing of five units or more. HB 184, the House version, is in House Labor and Commerce; the Senate bill, SB 14, is in Senate Finance. There is a clamor for more housing across the state but some say the problems are less about money being available, which this legislation addresses, but about site costs, materials and construction labor.

. . . Elections/State Agencies . . .

SB 64: Senate Majority hails election bill it passed. Not so fast, says Republicans

The Senate's Majority coalition hailed SB 64, the election reform bill passed May 12, as a long-needed cleanup of voter rolls; a strengthening of election security and transparency; a removal of barriers to voting and a speeding of results after elections are held. The bill was blocked by Republicans in the House, however, and will now wait until 2026. Republicans said the bill has weaknesses despite many Minority and governor's proposals being included. The goal of making it "easier to vote, but harder to cheat," is true only for the easier-to-vote part, said Senate Republican leader Mike Shower, R-Wasilla, who has been deeply engaged in the election overhaul. Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anch, who spearheaded the work on SB 64, said dropping the requirement for a witness signature to mail-in and absentee ballots will solve a big problem. Thousands of ballots cast in rural Alaska and on military bases have been disqualified because of this, he said. Sen. Robert Myers, R-North Pole, a Republican Minority member, disagreed with Wielechowski, arguing the witness signature adds a level of validation of residency, although he acknowledged the election division lacks resources to do signature verification. Witness signatures are required for Permanent Fund Dividend applications and there's no reason it can't be done for election ballots sent by mail, he said. Failure of the bill this year means that the 2026 elections will be held under existing rules.

SB 107: Alaska "Sunset Commission" moves from Senate State Affairs Committee

This bill, by Sen. Shelley Hughes, R-Mat-Su, would establish an Alaska "Sunset Commission" to review state agency functions and recommend program eliminations. The bill moved from Senate State Affairs May 17 and is now in Senate Finance. The measure is modeled after a similar commission in Texas. SB 107 is one of two initiatives underway aimed at increasing efficiency and reducing costs in state government. Also moving is SB 37, by Sen. James Kaufman, R-Anch., which would have state agencies set out strategic plans. SB 37 moved out of Senate State Affairs April 30 and is also now in Senate Finance.

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