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Bill clears way to build Texas A&M-S.A.

By [Melissa Ludwig](#) - Express-News

The Legislature passed a bill Wednesday that would immediately free up \$40 million in tuition revenue bonds to build a stand-alone Texas A&M-San Antonio campus on the South Side.

The bill would lower the enrollment threshold to trigger that money from 1,500 full-time students to 1,000, a mark the seed campus hit this spring.

It also would promote the seed campus, currently a system center run by Texas A&M-Kingsville, to an independent university.

The bill now goes to Gov. Rick Perry. He vetoed similar legislation in 2007, citing concerns about inefficiency.

"I feel like (the late) Sen. Frank Madla is looking down from heaven and he is seeing the dream that started on a paper napkin at a little restaurant come to fruition," said Maria Hernandez Ferrier, director of the seed campus.

Before his 2006 death in a house fire, Madla was a tireless proponent of the A&M campus.

In fact, it was a yellow sheet of notebook paper and the restaurant was Taco Haven on South Presa Street, said Harold Oliver, a former Madla staffer who now chairs the Texas A&M-San Antonio Foundation. More than a decade ago, Oliver, Madla and Texas A&M officials first met over tacos to map out where a new university should stand, and signed the paper for posterity.

"I put it in a box, then moved a couple of times," Oliver said. "I have it somewhere in storage. I will go look for that piece of paper and frame it."

Though Perry previously vetoed a similar bill, Oliver is confident the governor will oblige this time.

"He has already told us, 'You get it to me, I will sign it,'" Oliver said. "It really is the best thing for the state of Texas."

Critics, however, say the state doesn't have enough money to fund existing universities, much less new ones with heavy startup costs.

According to guidelines set by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, building out a full-service university with fewer than 3,500 students is inefficient.

But lawmakers, eager to bring new campuses to their home districts, have whittled that number down over the years.

The bill also would help a Texas A&M campus in Killeen and a University of North Texas campus in Dallas.

Sen. Carlos Uresti and Rep. Joe Farias, who helped sponsor the legislation, said it was their top priority this session. They're now pushing for \$6.2 million in operating funds for the seed campus.

According to Ferrier, the seed campus already is working with staff from Kingsville to make the transition to a stand-alone university. While some technological operations will stay in Kingsville, management will shift entirely to San Antonio as soon as the governor signs the bill, Ferrier said.

The university will immediately begin seeking accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Until the school wins candidacy for accreditation, students will continue to go through Kingsville programs to qualify for federal financial aid, Ferrier said.


In terms of construction, system officials will call for architects as soon as the bill is signed, and can hopefully break ground in early 2010, Ferrier said.

The campus will be on 700 acres south of Loop 410 between Pleasanton Road and South Zarzamora Street. Developers from the Verano Land Group donated the land to Texas A&M and are planning to build a large, mixed-use community surrounding the campus.

In February, officials broke ground on University Way, a city-funded road leading into the future campus.

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