

President's Message

Bill Hamilton, RSEA President

It's been a challenging, sometimes daunting, 16 months since we all began feeling the concerning, confining effects of the global pandemic. I'm now feeling some real optimism for a certain sense of return to something akin to "normal."

Meanwhile, it's been difficult to communicate, to socialize, and especially to make sure we're all safe and sound.

Here are some recent developments:

- While our office has been closed, it's now opening back up. The teamwork of the new RSEA Board (as of January 2021) is coming together. See the article identifying our Board members later in this issue.
- We've just finished a legislative session (with a special session coming up on July 8).
- We're beginning to plan for our next Annual Membership Meeting on September 29 (virtual again). There are more details about this on the back page of this issue.
- We're now beginning to work on a "refresh" of the RSEA website and logo under a new partnership agreement with the Association Member Benefits Advisors (www.amba.info); and
- YES, you are now getting this newsletter (the first in a while).

So, I offer all these as real signs of not only return to "normalcy" and, better yet, even progress. So, my message to you today is a positive one looking to the future.

Finally, as we enter our post-legislative cycle, we will be focusing on outreach and service to our current RSEA members and recruiting for new members. As part of the post-Covid world, we are about to commence a "refresh" of our RSEA website and our logo to make them more modern and up to date, more inviting and interactive, with state-of-the-art and strategic means of communicating with members as well as potential members. Be sure to look for more updates on this exciting project.

In closing, I want to express my thanks to all of you for supporting our legislative priorities and other initiatives over the years. I can remember when we first began this work at least 14 years (7 legislative sessions) ago and we always said these were long-term initiatives. There will now be more work to do. We will be here to do the work, and look forward to having you with us, hearing from you along the way.

We are grateful for your membership in RSEA, and I assure you it's always an honor for all of us on the RSEA Board of Directors to serve on your behalf.

As always, the Board and I are happy to hear your comments and suggestions. You may email us at office@rseaoftx.org or call 512-451-0087. ▣

Legislative Update

Carla James, Legislative Director and Bill Hamilton

As you may remember, the Texas Legislature meets from January to May in odd-numbered years. This year was no different.

We would like to provide a few highlights of some positive things that recently happened with some good prospects for the future. The previous session focused on shoring up the Teachers Retirement System, this session was time to do the same for ERS Fund, one of RSEA's top Legislative Priorities.

First, during the recent regular session of 87th Legislature, there were two important and positive legislative actions.

There was Senate Bill 321, sponsored by Senator Joan Huffman of Houston, along with House sponsor Representative Greg Bonnen of League City, putting our Employees Retirement Fund on an actuarially-sound path for the future.

With an initial \$1+ billion in House Bill 2, the supplemental appropriation bill, a proper payment schedule to the retirement fund has now started. SB 321 also directs ERS to develop a new "cash balance defined benefit" program for new employees; it does not affect current retirees or employees. This plan is like the plans for current municipal and county employees in Texas. It has a shared benefits and risks to both employees and the State, including a guaranteed minimum of 4% gain sharing. This new approach will apply *only* to those state employees hired after 09-01-2022. It has been mischaracterized, in our opinion, as "just another 401(k) program."

Going forward, RSEA plans to work with ERS and legislative leaders in the coming biennium to ensure good implementation of SB 321 to the benefit of all future employees and retirees.

This legislation also serves as a positive step in addressing the state's unfunded liabilities as a

means of protecting the state's credit rating, a matter which State Comptroller Glenn Hegar has often discussed.

Passage of HB 917

Then, there is House Bill 917 by Representative Ana Hernandez (RSEA's 2019 recipient of the Aikin Award, see our September 2020 newsletter) and Senate sponsor Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr., which now enables a retiree to stand for election to the ERS Board of Trustees as one of the three elected employee representatives. With this new law, it will now be possible for a State Retiree to sit at the decision-making table when key policy decisions are being made by the ERS Board. That means the next election in 2023 may include a spot for you!

Both bills relate to long-standing top priorities of RSEA, and you can see our letters to Governor Abbott supporting their enactment on our RSEA website at www.rseaoftx.org.

Legislative Coalition

We want to give a special recognition to an informal coalition of retiree and current employee associations which came together this session to help educate the Legislature on the best possibilities for addressing the long-term financial sustainability of the ERS fund. Therefore, we want to personally and publicly thank the leadership of these organizations for coming together to provide a united message to Legislators: Texas Public Employees Association, Texas DPS Officers Association, Texas Game Warden Peace Officers Association, AFSCME Texas Retirees, and Association of Texas Liquor Enforcement Agents. This was an unprecedented initiative on behalf of all 250,000 retirees and beneficiaries, and current, as well as future, state employees, and we were all proud RSEA was part of it.

Our work together helped educate the Legislature on the needs of the Fund and our support for action to address those needs.

Meet Your Board of Directors

At the 2020 Annual Meeting the new directors elected to serve two-year terms beginning January 2021 were:

Carla James (formerly w/ Department of Licensing & Regulation) worked in state government 25+ years, holding various positions in several agencies.

Rick Moss (formerly with Texas Workforce Commission) provided employment, training, veteran, and vocational rehabilitation services for over 31 years.

Ed Seidenberg (formerly w/ State Library) worked in state government for 45 years for several state agencies.

Others on the Board include:

Bill Hamilton, President (formerly w/ Office of Court Administration) has served on the Board since 2009, beginning as Treasurer. He has been President since 2010. He actively participates in several local, national, and international organizations.

Marie Moore, 1st Vice President (formerly w/ Bond Review Board) has served on the Board since 2007 and as 1st Vice President since 2013. She held offices in the Texas State Agency Business Administrators Association and was the first woman named Administrator of the Year in 2003.

Willie Piña, 2nd Vice President (formerly w/ Dept of Human Services) has been on the Board since January 2002, with previous positions as President and Treasurer.

Elena Diaz (formerly w/ Office of Attorney General) served on the Board since 2019 and began serving as Treasurer in 2021. She also retired from Travis County as Justice of the Peace and still works as a visiting judge.

Dona Medlock (retired from Comptroller of Public Accounts) has served on the Board since 2017. She returned to work at CPA as Director of the Enforcement Division. Her duties include overseeing the collection of state taxes and fees, and management of field offices.

Denice Bettencourt (formerly w/ Dept of Transportation) has been on the Board since 2019. She's held board and committee positions and continues to be active in local non-profits.

Eliza May (formerly w/ Funeral Service Commission) held multiple roles in state government. She has served on the Board since 2019. Since retiring, she dedicated time to researching public policy issues. She has also served on numerous boards of non-profits. ■

2020 Annual Meeting Highlights

Our September 24, 2020, RSEA Annual Membership Meeting was the first "virtual" conference; this was one of many firsts we all experienced last year.

Despite the many stresses and strains of 2020, our RSEA Annual Meeting was informative, congenial, and successful.

We had 126 registered attendees from around the state. A total of 23 people won a total of \$1,200 in door prizes. Door prizes were highly anticipated and twenty-two winners each received a \$50 VISA card. Jon Cradit of San Marcos was the winner of the grand prize: a \$100 VISA card!

Porter Wilson, Executive Director of our Employees Retirement System explained the agency's needs and requests they had made to the 87th Legislature. The primary "ask" was for long-term, consistent funding to get the retirement fund to an actuarially sound level.

Phillip Ashley, Associate Deputy Comptroller for Fiscal Matters at CPA, provided an update on the state's fiscal condition for the 87th Legislature.

Rachel Ciullo, UT Austin LBJ School of Public Affairs introduced our new agreement to promote public service in state government by sponsoring 4 graduate student scholarships over each of the next 5 years.

The business meeting included financial reports and election of directors and officers. Online communication was enabled to encourage member participation in the discussion.

Because it was virtual, we were unable to have onsite exhibitors. However, we were most fortunate to have as sponsors:

- Association Member Benefits Advisors (AMBA),
- BlueCross and BlueShield of Texas, and
- United Healthcare.

We very much appreciate their support. AMBA was especially helpful providing tremendous technical support expertise we needed to host and coordinate this virtual event.

See the back page of this issue for information on our 2021 Annual Membership Meeting. ■

Appreciation to Former RSEA Board Officer

Tom Griebel retired from the RSEA Board effective December 2020. He previously worked at the Texas Department of Transportation. He began serving on our Board in 2014 and was elected Treasurer in 2015. Tom's hands-on role in financial management was a highly valued contribution to RSEA.

On behalf of all members, we gratefully acknowledge his service to the state and to RSEA. ■

SAVE THE DATE

Wednesday, September 29, 2021

Virtual

2021 RSEA Annual Membership Meeting

We will provide more details as the date gets closer, but please block out the date for this fun, important, and informative event. Look for registration details in the next issue (August 2021).

At the meeting, you will hear more about the results of the last legislative session, updates from ERS, upcoming dates of annual insurance enrollment, and other relevant topics.

A short, but vitally important, business meeting will be a part of this virtual Annual Meeting. Items include approval of 2020 minutes, financial reports, and election of officers and directors.

A slate of new Board members will be presented. Also, nominations for Board positions may be made at the meeting.

And, of course, it will be your opportunity to win some of the many **DOOR PRIZES** we will award.

Interested in getting more benefits? Information details are available at

www.myambabenefits.info/rsea-of-texas