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Republican officials spar over Harris County tax policies

Judge, state sen. debate fair rates, economics amid Harvey recovery

By **Jeremy Wallace, Houston Chronicle** | December 1, 2017

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Photo: Joshua Guerra

IMAGE 1 OF 2

Senator Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston, approaches another senator at the Texas Legislature's Special Session on July 18th at the Texas State Capitol in Austin.

They never mentioned each other's name, but it was clear State Sen. Paul Bettencourt and Harris County Judge Ed Emmett were ready to resume jabbing at one another over tax policies and hurricane recovery at a conference in Austin on Friday.

Bettencourt, a Houston Republican, used an almost hourlong speech in Austin - with Emmett watching on from the second row - to blast counties, including naming Harris County specifically, for growing property tax revenues over the years. And he added a not-so-subtle dig at the county for not doing more to cut taxes on Hurricane Harvey-damaged homes.

"We have a problem that local property taxation is just rising too quickly," Bettencourt said as he showed slides that included Harris County property tax bills growing 36 percent between 2013 and 2016.

Those comments came just three days after Emmett, also a Republican, was blasting state leaders for a broken tax system that leaves urban counties like Harris unable to fully fund its growing needs.

But on Friday it was Bettencourt's turn, as he chastised local governments like Harris for keeping tax rates too high even as property values grow.

"As values go up, tax rates should be going down," Bettencourt told an annual meeting of the Texas Taxpayers and Research Association with Emmett just a few dozen feet away.

'Stirring the pot'

In an interview later, Emmett said it was tough to listen to without being able to offer a real-time rebuttal.

"He just keeps stirring the pot," Emmett said of Bettencourt in an interview after Bettencourt spoke. "It's almost personal, he doesn't like Harris County government."

But days earlier it was Emmett who unloaded on the state, accusing lawmakers of "narrow-minded" politics that result in mandates pushing down on local governments.

TRANSLATOR

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On Friday, Emmett addressed the same crowd Bettencourt did.

"While it's tempting to give a rebuttal, I don't want to," Emmett told the more than 300 people.

Emmett instead used his speech to stress that as an urban county with more than 2 million people in the unincorporated area alone, it has different needs than other more rural counties and shouldn't be subjected to one-size fits all legislation from the Legislature.

"We're all different," Emmett said. "That is why it's important to have local decisionmakers making those decisions."

'Shifting the burden'

Later, House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, seemed to chip into help defend Emmett and other local governments by acknowledge the state's role in increasing property tax bills.

"Some will tell you that high property taxes contribute significantly to the growing burden on homeowners, and I agree," Straus said. "I also know why our property taxes keep going up, because the state is paying less and less of the cost of public education, shifting the burden to local school districts and to their taxpayers."

Straus said the state used to pay about half of the cost of education and now is paying below 40 percent of those costs.

"The Texas House has tried repeatedly to do something about the school finance system that's driving property tax bills to go up but we haven't yet received the cooperation that we need,"

Straus said.

Bettencourt earlier in the morning had accused the House of derailing property tax reform during the Legislature's regular session. Bettencourt panned the House's last offer on property tax reform.

"It didn't have measurable property tax relief," Bettencourt said.

But House Ways and Means chairman Dennis Bonnen, an Angleton Republican who also spoke at the same even after Bettencourt and Emmett, said it was the Senate that derailed good property tax reforms because of a stubborn refusal to compromise.

"It was absolutely: 'You will do it my way or not at all,'" Bonnen said of negotiations with the Senate.

Andrea Zelinski contributed to this report.

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