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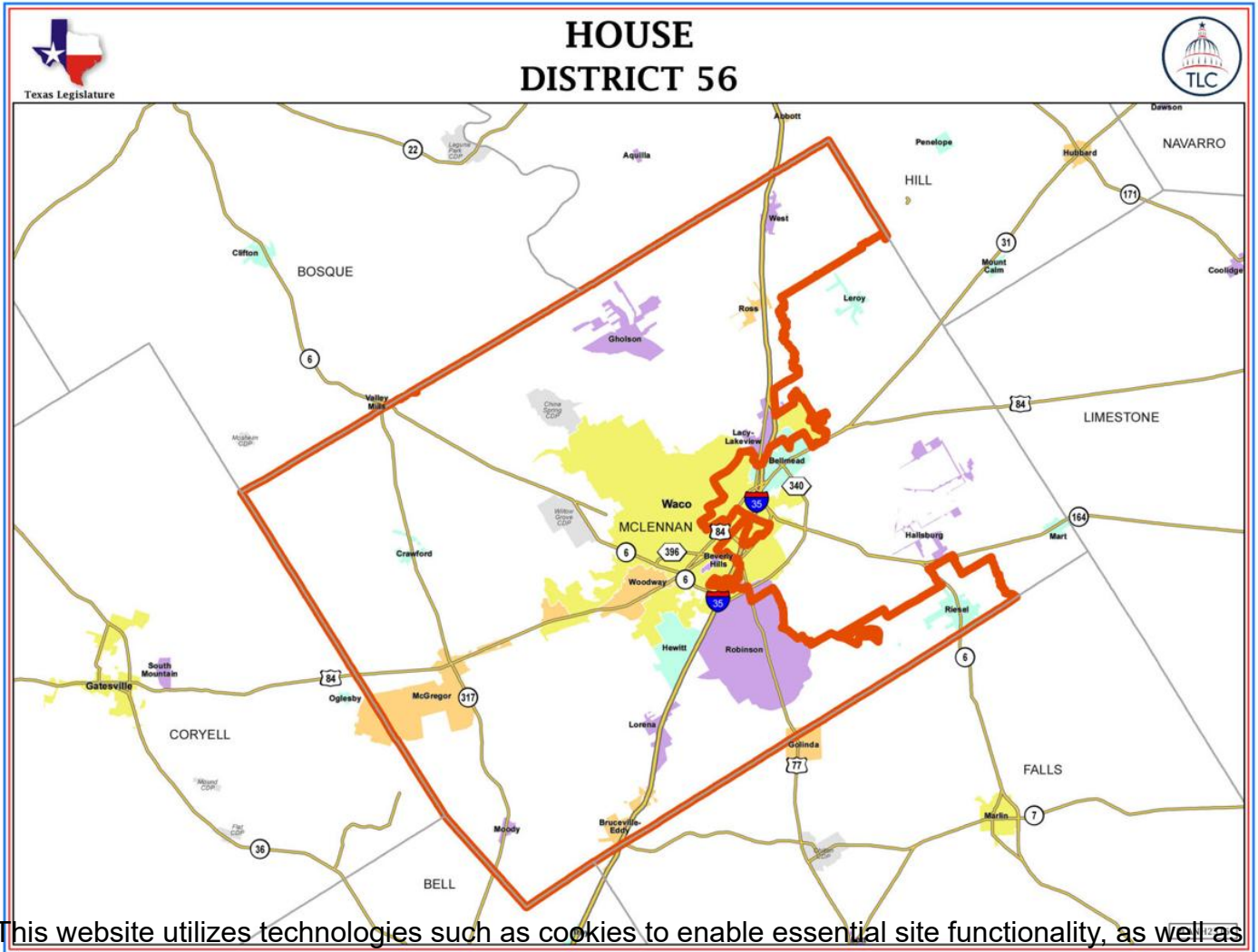
TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

# Texas House District 56 candidates focused on Bosque water issue, border, education

From the 2024 elections: Local coverage series

Matt Kyle

Dec 20, 2023



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Texas Legislative Council, provided

**A**ll three candidates in the wide-open November election for House District 56 named the southern border, education and Bosque River water quality among top campaign priorities, though the two Republicans and one Democrat have their own approaches to each issue.

The seat representing most of McLennan County in the state Legislature is without an incumbent candidate for the first time in at least 20 years, after Rep. Charles “Doc” Anderson announced in September he would retire at the end of his term. Anderson has held the position since unseating Democratic incumbent John Mabry in 2004.

Pat Curry and Devvie Duke, the two Republican candidates, will face one another in the March 5 primary. Each has gained the support of a major Texas Republican figure, with Gov. Greg Abbott endorsing Curry and Attorney General Ken Paxton endorsing Duke. Anderson also announced his endorsement of Duke on Tuesday.

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The winner of the Republican primary will face Democratic candidate Erin Shank in the Nov. 5 general election.

## Pat Curry

This website utilizes technologies such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as Curry, a Waco businessman, was the first to throw his hat in the ring. He

**announced his campaign in September** only a few days before **Anderson announced his retirement**. Curry was born and raised in Waco, and was highly

involved in the revitalization of Central Freight Lines in the 1990s, according to his campaign website.

Curry has also owned Rabroker Air Conditioning and Plumbing in Hewitt and Miracle-Ear Hearing Aid Centers. Curry said his experience as a business owner and leading thousands of employees would translate well into the Legislature, and pledged to be an accountable public servant.

“We need more businessmen in political positions,” Curry said. “I don’t know all the issues down there. And I’m not going to sit here and pretend like I do. I promise you one thing, when I dig into an issue, I’ll study it hard and I’ll know when I walk in the room what I think about it. I’ll listen to what people say and make a decision. What I’ll also do is be accountable. I will come back here when I make a vote on something, I’ll come back here and explain the vote. And I’ll explain why it affects McLennan County in this way, and why I did what I did. And I’ll back it up.”

Curry said the primary issue he is focused on is Bosque River water pollution. Earlier this year, many of Waco’s civic leaders raised alarm as the Legislature considered House Bill 2827, which aimed to remove regulations for dairy farmers along the Bosque River watershed. The Bosque River is the main source of water for Lake Waco, and many local leaders said the bill would lead to increased pollution of Waco’s water supply.



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Anderson unsuccessfully tried to hold up the bill with a procedural move before the House took it up and approved it, and he voted against it on the floor. Rep. Angelia Orr, whose District 13 includes Bosque County and parts of McLennan County, voted in favor of the legislation.

After the House approved the bill, it died in committee in the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development. Sen. Brian Birdwell, whose District 22 includes McLennan and Bosque counties and who chairs the Senate committee where the bill landed, declined to schedule a committee hearing on the measure before the legislative session ended.

While Curry said he is pro-business and supports the right of the dairy farmers to conduct their business, he said a solution must be found that benefits both sides. He said he will try and accomplish this without passing new legislation, and suggested looking to diversify Waco's water sources as a possible solution to the issue.

Curry also said he will be focused on fixing the issues at the southern border, problems he said he sees firsthand owning a ranch near the Texas-Mexico border. Curry said it is not an immigration issue, but rather a human trafficking and national security issue, and that the influx of border crossings under the Biden administration is funding cartels in Mexico.

“That’s why it’s not an immigration problem,” Curry said. “The immigration problem is that our federal government has not properly put in the facilities nor the people to process these people. But, have them stand in line, have them come and be processed or be checked out and decide whether they should be allowed to come in or not. If they are, then give them a tax number, let them come in and let them go to work. We are a country of immigrants.”

Curry also said he supports the education savings account bill, or vouchers bill, that has recently been pushed by Abbott. The proposal, which has divided the Republican party and so far failed to pass through multiple special sessions called for the purpose, would provide state money to at least partially pay tuition at private schools.

Curry said school choice has always existed for public schools and parents should have the option for private schools if they so wish. Curry said he believes the current bill would be a good test of the program, as only 25,000 students would be eligible for vouchers.

Curry also said he heavily supported the inclusion of pay raises for teachers in the bill, and said if elected, he plans to push for public school funding as well.

“I’m certainly supportive of education savings accounts, as long as it gets passed with the proper funding for schools as well,” Curry said. “I don’t want to take money away from public schools to do this test in this program.”

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# Debbie Duke

Duke was formerly the president of the McLennan County Republican Women, and is a member of the State Republican Executive Committee. A grassroots organizer, Duke said her experience in local Republican leadership, which often entailed traveling to Austin to testify on pending bills, makes becoming an elected representative the natural next step in her political journey.

Duke said under her leadership, the McLennan County Republican Women became one of the largest chapters in the Texas Federation of Republican Women. On the State Republican Executive Committee, Duke serves as chair of the election integrity committee as well as chair of the legislative workgroup for election integrity, and said all of this experience with the Legislature sets her up perfectly for a position in the House.



Duke

Debbie Duke, provided

Duke said election integrity will remain one of her hot-button issues if elected, with border security also being near the top of her priority list. Duke said the unsecured border has led to increased human trafficking and drug overdose deaths.

Duke also said she is focused on solving the Bosque water issue. She said McLennan County needs to diversify and increase its water sources, and said the regulations put into effect 20 years ago to protect Lake Waco need to stay in effect.

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Duke also said she wants to see the school voucher program work without having further regulations imposed on public or charter schools.

“I want freedom of choice for kids to go to school wherever their parents want them to go,” Duke said. “I don’t want to see them restricted by their ZIP code, and that needs to apply to everybody.”

Duke criticized Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, as working too much with Democrats, and said too many Republicans in Austin are focused on working through Democratic priorities instead of Republican ones.

If elected, Duke said she would be focused on passing conservative legislation.

“I’m the only true conservative choice in the county,” Duke said. “Austin’s really broken. And when we put conservatives in office, we expect them to get conservative legislation passed. If you’re the majority, you’re the majority. I’m sure there’s going to be some compromising that has to go on, but I look for Republicans to lead.”

## Erin Shank

Shank is a bankruptcy lawyer and former teacher who unsuccessfully ran against Anderson in the 2022 election, garnering 29.8% of the vote to Anderson’s 70.2%. Shank touted her experience with the law and representing clients, and said her opponents do not have experience representing constituents.

“I believe it is time that McLennan County is represented by someone who is experienced with representing people and knows how to study laws and write laws and can hit the ground running,” Shank said. “We have been represented by a retired veterinarian for 20 years in a role in which he had never represented people before that and didn’t have any experience in law. And I think it’s very important because I

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think we have lost a lot in the last 20 years and we need to catch up.”

Shank also said it is important to have a candidate who listens to the wishes of voters in the county, which she said Anderson had previously not done.

“That is the most important thing that McLennan County will get with me, because I don’t care what party tells me to vote for something,” Shank said. “If it is wrong for Waco and McLennan County, I will vote against it, absolutely. Because I’m not there for what the party said. I’m there for what’s the best for my community who I’m representing: House District 56.”



Shank

Reforming immigration and fixing the Bosque water issue are at the top of Shank’s list of priorities if elected. Shank said the current immigration laws are “broken,” and even though immigration is a federal issue, the Texas Legislature should be involved in the process since Texas is the state with the longest border with Mexico.

Shank said Texas should stop trying to sue the Biden administration and instead try to come together to reach a consensus on immigration. She also said migrants who apply for asylum should be allowed to work while their applications are pending, and that the applications need to be processed quicker.

Shank also took aim at the education savings account bill, which she referred to as the “voucher scam.” She said vouchers would negatively affect McLennan County schools, and that the majority of students in the county are enrolled in public schools.

If elected, she said her focus would be on advocating for teacher pay raises and increased funding for public schools.

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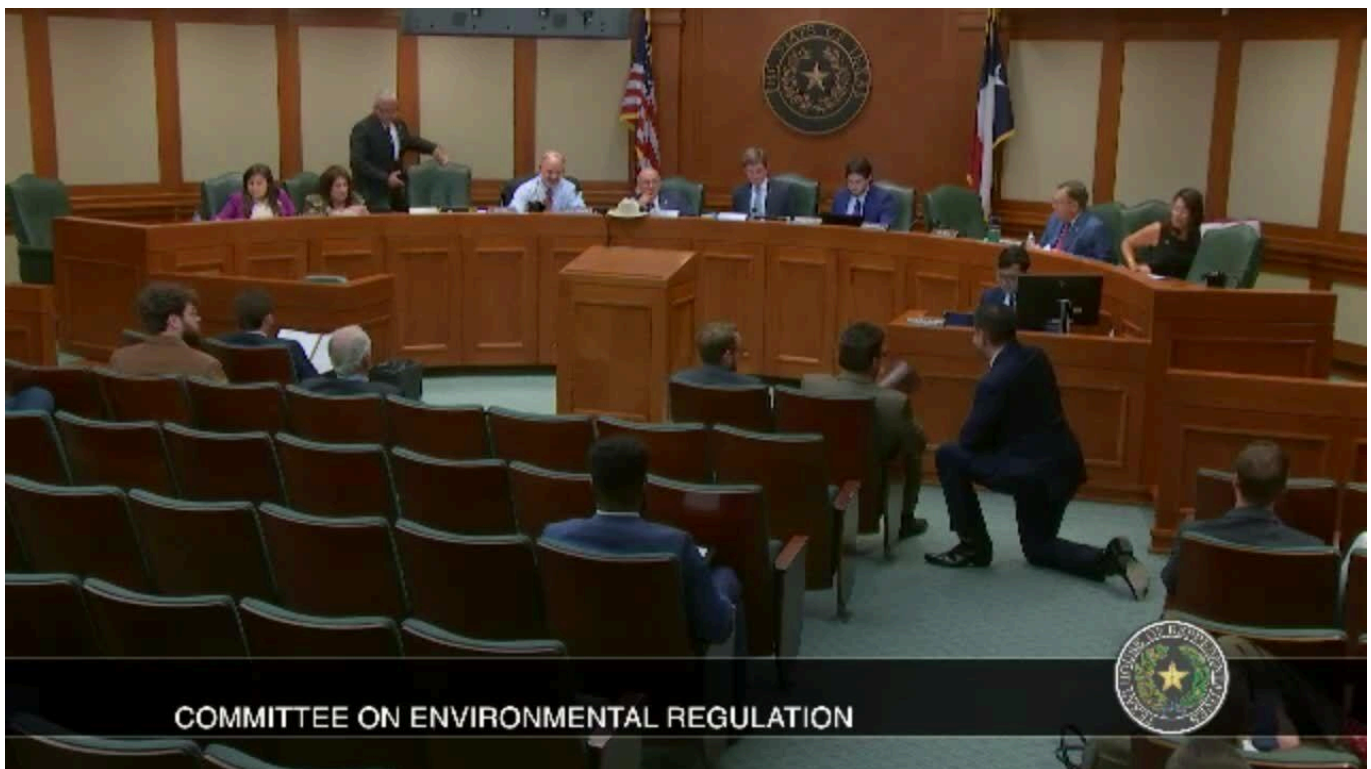
“We got 31 billion extra dollars, let’s pay our teachers,” Shank said. “That’s the most important job we have, is making sure there’s a well-educated generation to follow us.”



While Shank is running in a solidly red district and was handily defeated in her last race, she said she learned a lot from her first campaign and remains confident she could garner enough support to flip the seat. She said her last campaign taught her how to be a candidate, and she will apply what she learned last time to this race.

Shank said she plans to conduct a block walking program and several voter registration drives to get people ready for the election, and also wants to speak with constituents to better understand the issues.

“I consider myself very centrist,” Shank said. “I’m a Democrat. I’ve been married for 31 years to a Republican, so I’m very used to working with folks on the other side. And some of my best friends are Democrats and my best friends are Republicans. I want to get us back to a point where we can sit in the same room and talk.”



A bill that would change permitting rules in the Bosque River watershed got a hearing April 13 in front of the Environmental Regulation Committee of the Texas House. The city of Waco and most local entities oppose the bill due to water quality concerns. Speaking in favor of the bill are its sponsor, DeWayne Burns, R-Cleburne, and Darren Turley of the Texas Association of Dairymen. // Source: Texas Legislature

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**By Matt Kyle**

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