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TOP STORY

Q&A WITH TEXAS HOUSE CANDIDATE PAT CURRY

Q&A with Texas House candidate Pat Curry: Businessman digs deep into voucher, border issues

From the Election 2024: Complete local coverage series

Oct 11, 2024



Q&A with Texas House candidate Erin Shank: Attorney's run spurred by reproductive rights, public education

McLennan Countians were surprised in September 2023 upon not only receiving mailers announcing a Texas House District 56 run by energetic Waco businessman and political neophyte Pat Curry but listing dozens of individuals, prominent and obscure, endorsing him including former Waco mayors Kyle Deaver and Malcolm Duncan Jr. A few days later Republican state Rep. Charles “Doc” Anderson announced his decision not to run for an 11th term. Deaver acknowledged the decision by some to endorse Curry came in the wake of a Republican bill that passed in the Texas House in spring 2023 to unravel state regulations protecting Lake Waco — the area’s primary water supply — from pollution stemming from upstream dairies. The bill failed to gain traction in the Texas Senate but passed the

House easily, a wakeup call for city leaders. In a Waco Tribune-Herald editorial board interview, Curry, 59, a Republican, discusses concerns and complexities involving Gov. Greg Abbott's strong school voucher push, defeated by a coalition of Democrats and rural Republicans during the long, combative 2023 legislative session. He also discusses border security, immigration, property taxes and water. The district includes the western swath of McLennan County, including much of Waco.

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Question: I was amused to see Gov. Abbott cheerleading the start of public schools and school teachers, given that he helped kill a pay raise for teachers last session because the Legislature balked in passing his school voucher bill. Why should public school teachers not doubt your political alliance with the governor on the controversial issue of private school vouchers?

Pat Curry: Well, I do have an alliance with the governor on education savings accounts. I also think there's miscommunication regarding it. No. 1, he did put the money in for [public schools] in the fourth special session. It did not pass obviously because the ESAs didn't pass, which brought about quite a bit of change in Republican politics shortly thereafter. And there was a substantial increase in the basic allotment which would have not necessarily gone to teachers — I recognize that. I mean, it was not a teacher pay raise per se, it was a basic allotment increase.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The final voucher bill of 2023 would have allowed select students

statewide who exit public schools to receive \$10,500 annually for private school expenses or up to \$1,000 for homeschooling while increasing the state's basic per-pupil allotment for public school students from \$6,160 to \$6,700.] And, yes, the Texas Association of School Boards fought it. The miscommunication really involves what ESAs are all about. If you look at the model under consideration, it's the Indiana model more than anything else. [EDITOR'S NOTE: Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program began in 2011 as a program for low-income students and has since expanded well beyond that original mission.] It's pretty well tested. If you look at what's happened with them, the number of public school students has increased over the last 10 years by 300,000 students and 300 new schools in Indiana with ESAs in full force. The pay of teachers has increased dramatically, public school teachers, and the reason is competition. And it's not a competition where private schools are going to go hire a bunch of teachers. A lot of these small districts in rural areas, no one's going to open a private school in those areas because they just can't afford the overhead and so on and so forth. But your better teachers can form "microschools" and that's what happened in Indiana. A good teacher can just go out and form a microschool for, let's say, K-12 or 1-12 in a rural community and she takes 25 or 30 students and she gets \$8,000 a piece for them, whatever that number is, and she gets a big raise, she's got a small class, and she's teaching the way she wants to teach and she's still following the state guidelines. That makes school districts rethink where the money's going. And remember — ESAs are wide open in their potential use for workforce development and workforce training, so you can still stay in your school district and apply to go to Texas State Technical College for classes or McLennan Community College for teaching or nursing classes or even Baylor for engineering classes. If you get accepted, that's fine. But the ESA will pay for that tuition and they'll pay for the transportation to and from. So [the students] still stay in their schools. And if it's a technical credit, my goal is to see that the public school gets CTE [career technology education]. Right now they get a bonus for every child that goes into CTE in the school district, so if they're in a CTE class — and it seems like the No. 1 class in CTE is floral design right now — this opens up the door for the parent to be able to help children decide: "Do I want to go to TSTC? Can I afford to go to TSTC? Can I take welding? Can I take robotics? Can I take different levels of classes — HVAC tech,

plumbing, pipefitting — and then come out and decide is that what I want to do or is that not what I want to do?” It’s really a much broader program than it’s been presented to be. And when the teachers can go and form a microschool, it makes them think: “Wait a minute, I’ve got other skill sets that I can teach.” If you look at what we spent this year, it was \$16,700 per student. That’s how much money goes to public schools. Figure it out. Just on an average of 20 kids — call the allotment \$17,000 for \$340,000 for a class of 20 students to go to a classroom. And \$63,000 is the average teacher pay. Where’s the rest of that money going? Why does it all have to go to the administration? Why does it have to go to maintenance and things like that? The reality is there’s a big discrepancy there and I believe teachers will be very, very happy with the outcome of what happens for them with ESAs. Go study other states that have done it. They’ve been very successful. [EDITOR’S NOTE: Curry here is employing Texas Public Policy Foundation arguments that total operating expenditures for the 2022-2023 school year were more than \$92.4 billion, which worked out to \$16,792 per student, not the ordinarily cited \$6,160: “Even when you exclude money for facilities, Texas spent over \$68.1 billion on operating expenditures or \$12,389 per student,” the TPPF argues in an April 12, 2024 paper. “That’s more than double what opponents of school choice claim Texas spends.”]



As Republican candidate for the Waco area seat in the Texas House, Pat Curry is focusing on border solutions, school vouchers and protecting Waco's water supply from upstream contamination: "This is a critical time for our state and I believe my background and experience as a local businessman, farmer and rancher will greatly benefit our community in the Texas Legislature. I'm not a politician and I have no agenda other than serving the people and doing what's best for McLennan County."

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

Q: You're saying it costs \$16,000 a year to educate a kid, yet the basic per-pupil allotment is \$6,160. So you're saying we're losing about \$10,000 a kid?

Curry: We're spending \$10,000 extra per kid, right.

Q: Are you counting funding for special needs children, which are pretty high-dollar costs, and averaging all that into the amount to educate a single student?

Curry: Yeah, you just take the pot of money — call it \$92 billion — and divide it by the number of kids and it's something like \$16,800 per kid. And then you just take an average classroom, which is really 24, but let's boil it down to 20 kids in any school, and no matter how you do the math, it's \$340,000, which is a lot of money with \$63,000 going to the teacher. And by the way, I know it takes administration, I know it takes maintenance, I know it takes more than that, but if you go back and look historically at that ratio, it used to be one administrator for every two teachers. Now it's four administrators in administration for every one teacher. It's a major difference. Now, is TEA requiring more [of school districts], is it doing different things that require all this? Sure they are. But things seem to be out of hand simply because they can. And competition in any business I've been in — competition makes you better.

Q: So you're saying that, using administration as a broad term, there are four administrators for every teacher out there?

Curry: Well, again, that's not a number I've verified. Be careful with how that's used.

Q: There's legitimate concern that, without regulations, audits and transparent reporting of actual student academic results in these new microschools and home schooling and tutoring — all of which might be covered in any voucher bill in the 2025 legislative session — ESAs might be misused in ways that harm students in actual academic achievement. I mean, this is still taxpayer money. Right now there's a lot of accountability built into public schools. And I'm all for it. Put the screws to them, I say. But can you assure me the state will be putting the screws to home schools and microschools and such?

Curry: I think what you're discounting is the parent option, parent choice. This is a parent choice issue, it's not a school district choice issue and it's not a private school choice issue. Accountability should be at the level of the parent.

Q: Yeah, but look at the screws we're tightening on voting and voters in all these election integrity bills of the past two legislative sessions. There were widespread concerns expressed during the last legislative session about who will keep a sharp eye on academic success in these different education settings imagined by the school voucher crowd. The Indiana system of school vouchers dramatically multiplied the number of non-public school settings. Are we as a state prepared to keep track of all that — not only how the money is used by individual families but what kind of education these kids get, especially if we're going to compare them to public school students?

Curry: Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you're not making good points. Those are really the kinds of things that need to be fleshed out through state legislative committees and through the whole process. They had fleshed out some of them. Honestly I don't know the degree of accountability of private schools at the moment, but I don't believe there were very many. I went to private school through eighth grade and we took some tests to see where we stood, but I don't know whether those tests were ever compared against the public schools or anything else. In public schools we took standardized testing and there's a lot of questions about how effective that is as well. I also know that when 60 percent of your children who take a third-grade assessment test are not at grade level in reading, that's a serious problem. And that's where we are. It's a major issue.

Q: Why are so many of our public schools struggling?

Curry: Having had a couple of kids graduate from public schools the last few years, I think you have a variety of things going on, not the least of which is social media, cellphones and sheer costs, and then you have the craziness of security and school shootings and so many different aspects to deal with. And, frankly, you know as well as I do that when government gets involved in something, the worse it is. Bureaucracy feeds more bureaucracy. School districts — we've got some great ones here, make no mistake — they all have their issues just like companies. But the reality is all these things are really difficult to deal with. Think about just being a teacher 20 years ago

and now you have social media and mental health issues and all the things that go along with it that didn't seem to exist when I was in high school. At least, we didn't know about it.

Q: Three years after Gov. Abbott declared the state of Texas would build a wall along the Texas-Mexico border, he has 34 miles to show for it. The price tag is \$25 million per mile and the border is 1,254 miles. Is there a better investment for our taxpayer dollars?

Curry: Yes and no. Right now, the pace is about a mile a week. They've got crews working ahead of crews. But we've got a long border. Parts of it such as Eagle Pass are places where you really do need to stop that influx of people at one time. There's also lots of problems with eminent domain and taking people's land and so forth. It's a tedious issue. The river barrier [erected this year on Gov. Abbott's order] is probably one of your best options as far as slowing them down in areas and pushing them to areas where you can actually bring your security people to control. In Eagle Pass, they put up the razor wire and that's been very effective and no one's hardly crossing there. So the hinterlands are really the issue. We'll still always have to deal with the hinterlands in dealing with border security.

Q: Yet much of the hinterlands are a defense unto themselves. In 2008 journalist J.B. Smith and the Waco Tribune-Herald did a six-month investigation into border security that revealed places such as the hostile, scorching Chihuahuan Desert region of Texas' Big Bend and Sonoran Desert of Southern Arizona often testify to the perils of border crossings in the bones of dead immigrants found there.

Curry: In parts of the border, that's correct. But the reality is you can have border security and watch much bigger areas in some of those spots because they're not flooding you in one spot.

Q: Do you support the former president's plan to set up deportation camps and round up millions of illegal immigrants and ship them out?

Curry: I think I would rather refine that to some level. First off, I don't think it's possible to do. Second, I think that you have people who go through the immigration process and we accept them, right? You certainly have your bad actors and finding them is very difficult. Oftentimes you don't find them because they are bad actors in the U.S. But remember, we don't have systems to really check to see if they've done illegal things in their own countries. We don't talk to those countries. That is, our systems don't talk. Most of them don't even have [criminal-tracking] systems.

Q: Regardless of who wins the presidential election of 2024, what would you recommend the next president of the United States do regarding the border and immigration?

Curry: First and foremost, you have to put in place throughout the United States a system where all law enforcement are able to talk with each other, to understand where the bad actors are, much like what we've done with Operation Lone Star [deploying the Texas National Guard and Texas Department of Public Safety to the southern border] and Operation Lone Star Task Force [primarily involving sheriffs] in Texas. Sheriffs throughout the United States under the U.S. Constitution have the power to do things that most law enforcement can't. They actually have constitutional powers to do some of the things to help with this and at least be able to train their people and be part of a nationwide effort to try and deal with the 20 million or 30 million people who have already come in. [EDITOR'S NOTE: Just to clarify an increasingly common misconception spread by errant sheriffs and their apologists, county sheriffs have no specific constitutional authority to second-guess, nullify or exceed federal laws under the U.S. Constitution. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement last year stopped offering law enforcement credit to members of Texas law enforcement who attend Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association "constitutional" training courses.] Secondly, we have got to staff up immigration personnel and staff up immigration courts and deal with the sheer numbers of people who are (legally) knocking at our front door and asking to come in. You have to secure your border with razor wire or whatever it takes to keep them from coming in

through your window, so to speak. But when they come to your front door, they have to be able to raise their hand and you have to be able to talk to them and decide whether you're going to let them in or not.

Q: I saw you at the Texas Public Policy Foundation policy seminar, which means you should be familiar with the foundation push to eliminate school property taxes and perhaps all property taxes. I also heard its officials discuss it at a Republican Party of McLennan County luncheon. How then would we fund cities, counties, public schools, sheriffs, courts, fire departments, police and such? A state income tax is an impossibility in Texas. A sales tax of an estimated 18 to 21 percent on goods and services, assuming no exemptions whatsoever?

Curry: OK, I haven't seen the 18 to 21 percent number.

Q: These numbers come from Republican-led state legislative committee hearings in the last several years.

Curry: If you just think in the sheer terms of it, I think it's a realistic possibility to reduce property taxes. But to eliminate them entirely is — I just don't know how you do it. You still have to deal with, like it or not, infrastructure issues, bond issues. Those come from property taxes. And unless there's another revenue source, [it's difficult to foresee]. Let's just say a consumption tax is put into place as opposed to a sales tax and the consumption tax broadens out with more money coming in, then you have to figure out how you're going to allocate it back [to the various local governmental entities].

Q: What do you mean “consumption tax” here?

Curry: The things I've seen when it relates to eliminating property taxes, they're calling it a consumption tax.

Q: But that's essentially a sales tax, it's a de facto sales tax.

Curry: In the place of a sales tax.

Q: Are you talking about a value-added tax like they have in Great Britain? I'm not sure what you mean here.

Curry: I don't really know the difference, I'm just using terminology I've seen. When I've been approached about eliminating property taxes — and I'm not involved in that world deeply at this point — but I'm like, "OK, you explain to me how we're going to eliminate property taxes."

Q: Some residents actually say, "Oh, you just need to add a couple of cents to the sales tax to replace property taxes."

Curry: I haven't seen the numbers.

Q: Well, I have. My latest numbers come from Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick. We have outlined all this in great detail in this newspaper.

Curry: Believe me, you've made the statement and I don't disagree with you. And, by the way, he's very involved with the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Q: Yes, but don't get him started on this scheme to shift entirely to sales taxes in lieu of property taxes. I just wanted to know your views.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Lt. Gov. Patrick at a June 2023 press conference stated of banning property taxes in Texas: "Oh, there is another way you could do it. If you want to have money for schools and health care and police and everything else, you just increase the sales tax from six cents to about 20 cents. And that's not going anywhere in the Legislature and the people would never approve it. So let's just stop this, 'We're gonna end property taxes.' It's a fantasy."] To dig further into this issue, every spring there's outcry over local property appraisals. Yet our friends at the local appraisal district admit efforts at greater accuracy in property assessments are complicated because sales prices in real estate transactions are not easily accessible. Given the number of constituents who contest appraisals, is it time for an overhaul in property appraisals?

Curry: I think so. I think it should be based on sales data.

Q: One reason some city leaders broke their traditionally nonpartisan stance to support you is House Bill 2827, which would have unraveled regulations protecting Waco's water supply in Lake Waco from upstream dairy cattle waste along the Bosque. You mentioned to me this spring talking with dairy leaders about reasonable accommodations but without risking ever again our being beset with the foul-tasting Waco water that you and I remember 20 years ago. Can you find such middle ground to prevent massive algae blooms from blossoming again in Lake Waco or upstream?

Curry: AB-SO-LUTELY! Is that a good enough answer for you? I'll say this. You won't see a bill come forward — not on my watch — regarding that. You won't see any change when it comes to the law and the legal side of that until such time that we can deal with the empirical data. The amount of phosphorous and oxygen and nitrogen in the water is measurable, so the real question becomes: What are the dairy farmers doing about it? I have met with the dairy association, I've met with the Texas Farm Bureau and constituents on all sides of this. We have a pretty good plan in place right now. Several dairy farmers are installing digester systems that take phosphorous out of [cattle droppings] basically and they also generate power, generate energy, from that. They generate fertilizer we can use on our fields. With Walmart coming to Robinson with a big dairy operation involving several hundred jobs, that's a major deal because we farm a lot of corn, a lot of silage [corn bits fermented to feed cattle or sheep during dry seasons] here, and we need fertilizer, they create fertilizer, and we need to get it here and use it. So we want those dairies to grow. But we also want our water to stay clean. So right now we are working very closely with the dairy farmers, with the dairy association, with the Texas Farm Bureau, with leaders in Waco and McLennan County, and all of us are on the same page.

Q: You attended the Republican Party of Texas state convention in San Antonio. Do you favor a public referendum on secession from the United States, which the platform committee favored but the party legislative

priorities committee did not?

Curry: I do not. It's unconstitutional.

Q: Well, that's straightforward enough. The party platform committee but not the legislative priorities committee endorsed a "concurrent majority" scheme for statewide elections. Rather than candidates prevailing if they win a majority of voters across the state, they would win only if they also won most of the 254 individual counties.

Curry: I'm not familiar with that.

Q: The plan would allot each county one electoral vote. Each county gets that one vote regardless of population, whether Loving County with 64 residents or Harris County with 4.7 million residents.

Curry: To be honest, I don't even know constitutionally how that would work.

Q: Oh, it's definitely not constitutional.

Curry: I'll try to read up on that one for next time.

Q: Former President Trump has stressed that any abortion ban be decided by the people on a state-by-state basis but that this should be tempered by exceptions in cases pivoting on rape, incest or life of the mother. Do you agree?

Curry: First off, I am pro-life. I agree that those issues, brought before the legislatures, could be looked at. Texas has a law in place today and I think there's been litigation over a few of those laws in how far this goes. I don't know. I haven't been involved in that. My focus has really been on border security, which I know more, and I've really stayed focused on that. So I've not been involved in that discussion. I'm a supporter of Care Net [Pregnancy Center of Central Texas] and they support women who even choose to have abortions at times.

Q: So you don't have a position on that?

Curry: Not particularly. I mean, I'm pro-life.

Interview conducted by Tribune-Herald Editor Steve Boggs, Managing Editor J.B. Smith and retired opinion editor Bill Whitaker. This interview has been condensed and edited for brevity and clarity.

Early voting

Early voting in the Nov. 5 general election begins Monday, Oct. 21 and continues through Friday, Nov. 1.

Registered McLennan County voters can cast an early ballot at any the following locations:

- McLennan County Elections Administration Office, Records Building, 214 N. Fourth St., Suite 300
- Waco Multi-Purpose Community Center, 1020 Elm Ave.
- Hewitt City Hall and Library, 200 Patriot Court
- Robinson Community Center, 106 W. Lyndale Ave.
- First Assembly of God Church, 6701 Bosque Blvd.

Early voting locations are open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, Oct. 21-25. Voting hours are 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26, and 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 27. Voting hours are 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday, Oct. 28 through Friday, Nov. 1.

For more information, call the McLennan County Elections Office at 254-757-5043.

McLennan County's 46 voting centers will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Election Day, Nov. 5.

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