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## Agency News

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### Executive director's legislative update

By Bryan Collier

Both the House and Senate have finished working on their respective versions of the general appropriations bill. As is always the case, there are some significant differences between the two proposals, consequently a conference committee consisting of appointees from both the House and the Senate has been formed to resolve the differences between the two budget proposals.

However, in regards to the appropriations to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the two legislative chambers are generally in agreement. Most agency functions are funded at the current FY 2016-17 appropriated levels. The most notable exception involves a reduction in funding based on declining offender populations. Because the offender population is well below our current operating capacity, four TDCJ correctional facilities will be closed, to include the Ware Unit in Colorado City and three privately-oper-

ated facilities: the Bartlett State Jail, West Texas Intermediate Sanction Facility and Bridgeport Pre-Parole Transfer Facility. Our agency is already making preparations to assist Ware Unit staff in transferring to nearby units, and to actively recruit displaced private sector employees in order to fill existing vacancies.

Appropriations for employee benefits such as health insurance and the pension program are not included in the TDCJ budget, but the preliminary budget decisions by both chambers maintain the state's current contribution rates for employee pensions, and fund the state's share of health care costs. Keep in mind, however, that the cost of health care continues to increase, and this affects the employees' share of those costs as well. On September 1, state employees are likely to see some increase in their health care premiums, or plan modifications, to address the rising costs.

In regards to other legislation, the Sunset bill for the Employees Retirement System continues to move through the legislative process with no significant amendments. There are a number of bills dealing with criminal justice and corrections issues, but nothing has passed the House or Senate that would significantly impact TDCJ's operations. One interesting proposal intended to enhance prison security would require drones flying over correctional facilities to maintain a height of at least 400 feet. Several other states have adopted similar statutes in an effort to prevent the introduction of contraband through the use of drone aircraft.

Although the session is drawing closer to conclusion, there have been no final decisions on any policy or fiscal matters impacting TDCJ. The legislative session will end on Monday, May 29, at which point the Governor will have until Sunday, June 18, to approve or veto legislation. We will continue to

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use the agency website to keep you informed of the decisions being made in the capitol.

In addition to providing a legislative update, I want to remind you that memorial services for our fallen co-workers will be held at many TDCJ units and facilities across the state in conjunction with the beginning of National Correctional Officers and Employees Week. The TDCJ Memorial Service in Huntsville will be held at the Texas Prison Museum on Friday, May 5, at 10:30 a.m. I understand not every employee can attend the memorial services, but I hope everyone takes some time to contemplate their sacrifices and pay respect to these heroic men and women.

As always, thank you once again for your efforts on behalf of all Texans. ●