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HK: THE BACKSTORY ON HOUSE HARMONY IN PASSING APPROPRIATIONS BILL

In evenly divided House, wedge issues temporarily put aside

Yesterday's outbreak of peace and harmony in passage of the much anticipated appropriations bill was the reflection of an evenly divided House, a speaker seeking to nurse a healing institution and the willingness of most parties to find grounds for consensus rather than points of contention.

Appropriations Chair **Jim Pitts** made it clear to all when he said this was not a top-down, management directed spending bill. There were no special earmarks as rewards for loyalty and by inference, no cuts as punishment for independence. This was the legitimate, independent work product of 27 House committee members and the public work groups in which they toiled.

In preparation for the Friday marathon, House Republican Caucus Chair **Larry Taylor** met with his Democratic counterpart, **Jim Dunnam** Thursday evening. They each brought a handful of lieutenants and sat for hours going through the package of hundreds of SB1 amendments agreeing to strip out the ones likely to rip apart the House, needlessly prolong the debate and accomplish little more than cut up the members.

Rather than allow endless hours of debate, amendments with clear points of order were either pulled down before hand or shot down as they were being laid out.

Since being elected, Straus has emphasized his intent to move the key decision-making back to the floor and the members.

It was no surprise then that the key chairs were constantly visible on the floor, nursing accommodation rather than confrontation. As we previously wrote, Calendars Chair **Brian McCall** even used a lull in the debate to ask members to make sure his committee knew their three highest priority bills so they could make sure they were set.

No threats of punishment that this observer could detect. No picking scabs or pouring salt on open policy wounds.

Family planning services, stem cell research and a dozen other hot button issues were quietly negotiated rather than fought openly on the floor – admittedly frustrating for reporters and campaign consultants seeking fist fights and open conflict. But after the dysfunction of the last legislative session, a welcome alternative to people who just wanted the Texas House to work.

These hot button, red meat battles are not gone. They may yet appear in subsequent bills – but yesterday’s tacit agreement from both sides was that, at least this time, the red meat battles would not be fought out in the appropriations bill.

At one point, Republican **Jody Laubenberg** and Democrat **Garnet Coleman** were deep in discussion near the press table on some potentially blow-up hot button amendment. They apparently cut a deal, took it over to **Phil King (R-Weatherford)** and **Jessica Farrar (D-Houston)**. When the deal was explained, they jokingly cried out “kumbaya” and another two-hour floor fight was averted.

The House even recessed for 45 minutes so Democratic education guru **Scott Hochberg** could meet with the *Republican Caucus* to explain his school finance amendment that resolved some issues with school funding formulas and property tax relief dollars. One member even had a camera phone photo of Hochberg making his case in front of the GOP Caucus in the front of the Speakers committee room.

To be sure, not all members were happy with the process. Some on the former leadership team were forlorn over having been sidelined with relatively little role to play. But for this bill at this moment – the only must pass bill of the session – the normally rowdy and cantankerous House decided to get the deal done and move on.

Certainly, the fact that little else has yet reached the House floor strengthened the Speaker’s negotiating hand. Everyone understood that passing the appropriations bill was the key to unlocking the logjam. Starting Monday, the House will have a full Calendar and transition from 20 mph to 70 mph. But even with their foot on the accelerator, time is growing short and some members are frustrated that only about three weeks remain for second readings.

Straus’ next test is the appointment of the conference committee. But clearly, the unanimity of the House on the spending bill sends a strong message as the yet to be named conferees prepare to meet with their Senate counterparts.

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